THE PARTISAN REVIEW AWARD

The editors of PARTISAN REVIEW are pleased to announce an annual PARTISAN REVIEW AWARD of one thousand dollars, to be given to a writer who has made a significant contribution to literature. This award will not be given for any single work published within the year, but rather in recognition of valuable and continued literary achievement; and it will be restricted to writers in the English language.

The judges will be the editors and advisory board of PARTISAN REVIEW. This year's award will be announced in the October, 1949 issue.

The purpose of a literary award, if it is not to be a gratuitous gesture, ought to be defined by what it does, or aims to do, in relation to the situation of our culture. At the present time there is no lack of prizes. What these prizes do or aim to do for the state of culture is, however, sometimes open to question. Most prizes for the "best" work of a given period, usually a year, are likely to celebrate a passing public success that may have little connection with literature in its more serious and permanent sense. On the other hand, there are those prizes which crown great careers when they are essentially complete and have already reached full recognition. The PARTISAN REVIEW AWARD will not compete with prizes of either kind. Its main purpose will be to give vigorous affirmation to the importance of literary standards in the present cultural situation. For this reason it seems more desirable to make the award for a body of work rather than for a single book. Moreover, we hope that the award will do something for the recipient (in other than the monetary sense) and not be a gesture of recognition where no recognition is needed. Under ideal conditions, then, the award should serve to bring forward an author who has not obtained the place or influence in public taste that his work merits.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

COMMENT

A PRIZE FOR EZRA POUND

The awarding of a prize is a public act usually surrounded with many difficulties. When the prize is literary, there are not only all the difficulties that attend literary judgment, but the further complications from the fact that the judges, because of the public nature of the award, act both as citizens and literary critics.

The Bollingen Fondation has recently announced that the Bollingen Prize for Poetry, the first of an annual series, has been awarded to Ezra Pound for *The Pisan Cantos* as the best book of poetry published during 1948. The judges were the Fellows in American Letters of the Library of Congress, among whom are T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Katherine Anne Porter, and Robert Lowell. In the public statement accompanying the award the judges tell us that they were aware that the choice of Pound was likely to provoke objections, and their brief statement implies that they have given these objections careful consideration, ending with something like an affirmation of a general principle:

> "To permit other considerations than that of poetic achievement to sway the decision would destroy the significance of the award and would in principle deny the validity of that objective perception of value on which any civilized society must rest."

The sentiments behind this declaration seem to us admirable. Our only interest here is to insist on the application of this principle. Civilization is a difficult task for all of us, requiring that we live in many different domains of human life at once, in each of which we are called on to affirm the principle of the "objective perception of value." It would be a pity if in the enthusiasm of affirming an "objective perception of value" in one direction we ceased to affirm it in another; if in the aesthetic recognition of Pound's poetry as valuable we chose to forget all about the humanly ugly attitudes of which he has been a spokesman both in his writing and in his brief and lamentable career as a broadcaster.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In this number of PARTISAN REVIEW we print a long essay on Pound's poetry by John Berryman. Our printing of this essay is an affirmation of our belief that independent aesthetic judgment must be the continuing task of criticism, and in this belief we are clearly in agreement with the attitude enunciated by the Bollingen judges. It is not likely that Mr. Berryman has said the last word in the criticism of Pound (in these matters there is never a last word), but it is likely that he has made out the strongest possible case for Pound's having a subject matter as a poet. Mr. Berryman deals chiefly with the earlier and middle phases of Pound's career, and does not touch upon what Pound's subject matter became in recent years. This is perhaps incomplete, since our understanding of the whole career of a writer must surely take into view what his subject matter was capable of degenerating into under the pressures of personal and social disintegration. But whatever the critical truth here may be, it seems to us that Mr. Berryman's essay is in a different boat from the statement by the Bollingen judges, who were making a public award and were therefore more directly involved in public responsibilities.

Two things have to be, and are here distinguished: the case of Pound the man, and the value of the particular book, *The Pisan Cantos*. Pound the man has passed beyond the court of literary criticism into the jurisdiction of psychiatry and public justice, and it would be gratuitously vindictive for anyone to heap new tribulation on his wretched figure. Therefore our concern is, like that of the Bollingen judges, directly with the single book.

The statement by the judges shows an admirable frankness, but it is a pity that having gone so far in being frank, they did not go all the way, and actually name and face the specific objections they foresaw. The possible statement, which they might have made and the details of which each judge may have traced mentally, might then run something like this (considerations of style omitted):

"We are aware of the objections that may be raised concerning Pound's career as a fascist and anti-semite. However, under the terms of this award, we have confined our judgment to his poetry, and specifically the poetry found in the particular book under consideration, *The Pisan Cantos*. Of course, we have not missed the fact that this book itself expresses some of those unfortunate attitudes that led to Pound's downfall:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Pétain defended Verdun while Blum
was defending a bidet.

These lines express a vicious anti-semitic lie that was a part of the official Vichy propaganda during the War. Nevertheless, under the terms of the award, our judgment is of the poetry as poetry, and therefore we cannot reject it because of political considerations.

"To be sure, we know that the matter of these lines is not a political belief (with which we might disagree), but a deep human attitude, an emotion of hatred that is hideous, ugly and vicious and is expressed even more painfully in other lines in the book:

the yidd is a stimulant, and the goyim are cattle
in gt/proportion and go to saleable slaughter
with the maximum of docility

and again:

and the goyim are undoubtedly in great numbers cattle
whereas a jew will receive information.

But if the reader considers these verses carefully for their rhythm and diction, their effective use of a living colloquial language, he will be led to overlook, we think, the vicious and ugly emotion expressed.

"Our problem would be much easier if this were a dramatic poem, in which this odious human attitude was expressed by one of the characters with whom the author need not be in agreement. But *The Pisan Cantos* is a lyrical poem, or group of lyrical poems, in which Pound is expressing Pound, and this ugly human attitude expressed in the lines above is one that the poet seeks to convey as his own to the reader. This has been another difficulty we have had to surmount in making our award.

"Nor do we feel that the difficulty is overcome by saying, in excuse of Pound, that this hideous attitude is the expression of a pathological mind. We know that, however privately pathological this mind may be, the attitudes it expresses are historically connected with certain objective facts like six million Jews dead in Europe, in crematory ovens or battles of extermination; and historical facts like these make it immensely more difficult to perform that necessary aesthetic judgment that separates matter from form in a poem.

"All these difficulties might have been shirked if we had chosen not to make the award at all for the year 1948. Nobody compelled us to grant this prize. Under the terms of the award, the prize need not

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

be given in a year when no book is deemed to meet critical standards. But it seemed to us more important that all the foregoing difficulties be met, and that in the interests of civilization the aesthetic principle be affirmed that a poet's technical accomplishments can transform material that is ugly and vicious into beautiful poetry."

Naturally, it would be foolish to expect any jury of selection ever to make a statement like this. Nobody is compelled to wear his complete honesty in public; it would be tedious to assemble such a costume, and tedious to have to observe it. The brief statement accompanying the award seems to show that the judges may have traversed these details involved in their choice. We hope that they did. We hope even more that all those persons interested in literature and "civilized society" who have read the news of the award and its accompanying statement will be moved to follow through the details of the judges' difficulties outlined above.

Every particular literary judgment brings us in the end to some question of principle, and we should not like to leave the Pound case without bringing out this general question to which it has led us. During the 'thirties literature was subjected uncritically to all kinds of aesthetically distorting or irrelevant political attitudes. These political attitudes have by this time collapsed, leaving behind them a deposit of vague sentimentalities which, while obstructing any current of new political thought, still makes it impossible for many people to separate aesthetic from other considerations. When a historical movement collapses, it seems, it does not leave even the virtues of its vices. The statement by the Bollingen judges shows a laudable intention to reaffirm the validity of aesthetic principles. Our history, however, would be incomplete if we did not notice that within American literary criticism over the past decade or more there has developed another attitude which is so obsessed with formal and technical questions that it has time for only a hasty glimpse at content. Given these two conflicting tendencies, the perennial question of form and matter in a literary work seems to be still with us and is perhaps not altogether solved by the brief statement of the Bollingen judges. The Pound case enables us to put it to aestheticians in this definite way:

How far is it possible, in a lyric poem, for technical embellishments to transform vicious and ugly matter into beautiful poetry?

William Barrett

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Milton Klonsky

ALONG THE MIDWAY OF MASS CULTURE

A tourist snapshot of Hell, or the entrance of Hell: Coney Island on a hot Sunday during the summer with millions of people stretched naked on the sand, or wallowing, stumbling and falling over one another in the surf. The beaches are so jammed they can occupy only as much space as their bodies. Against the walls of the apartment houses or in the courtyards of the huge Baths facing the ocean, the echoes of all their millions of little voices are reflected back and compounded into a stunning roar—the "strange tongues . . . . words of pain, voices deep and hoarse and sounds of hands" which Dante heard in the outer ring of the Inferno, where the outcasts of Hell turn "in the air forever dyed, as sand when it eddies in a whirlwind." These are the great swarm of humanity who lived their lives "without blame and without praise, but were for themselves," and so were spewed out by both God and the devil.

The masses were put in their place—outside—and socially restricted by Dante even from his Infernal freakshow. In the plays of Shakespeare as well, though he himself was a plebeian, the appearance off-stage of the mob, that "beast with many heads," could evoke imagery of profound nausea. When the mass man was given an individual role, it was either as a clown or the butt of ridicule. And yet the revulsion of both poets, deep as it was, merely reflected the universal prejudice of their own ages. The culture of the Renaissance could allow the dignity of Man only in the abstract, or in great individuals, but never in the whole lump.

It is, then, more an historical than a literary problem to account for the gradual leavening and rise of this lump in time—from the domestic tragedy of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, to the pastoral sentimentalism of Grey and Crabbe; from the poor-but-proud "a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

man's a man for a' that" defiance of Burns and Wordsworth, to the celebration of the "divine average" by Whitman; and from the depiction of low-life in the novels of Dickens up to the psychological casing of debased urban and rural types in Dreiser and Faulkner. By the nineteenth century, this social leavening process had gone so far that Tolstoy, in an attack on the new French symbolist poetry, could even question the sanctity of Art itself and prefer "Uncle Tom's Cabin" to Shakespeare and Russian folksongs to Beethoven (although he himself knew better), solely because they appealed to a greater mass of people.

The Coney Island culture is, of course, a phenomenon of the twentieth century.

The age demanded an image
Of its accelerated grimace,

as Ezra Pound said, which it was quick to find. Comic strips, pulp fiction, movies, radio serials, commercial jazz and the rest are a direct result of modern technology and public education. Whether we choose to dignify these products by the name of Art is a semantic problem—what is central is that they usurp the functions of traditional art in setting the styles, the manners, the images, the standards and the goals of life for millions, almost as though they were the organs of an un-official state religion. And in its scope, this sub-culture is wide enough to include the millionaire and the dime-store clerk, the president of the United States and the Negro sharecropper, the old and the young, in a truly classless and democratic consonance of spirit.

Whitman imagined that the new forms to be developed by a democratic art would be a further revelation of the old, and could be exposed merely by stripping off the outer layers of decayed sensibility. But even the form of the novel, which had been the chief literary vehicle of the middle-class since its inception, now, in the hands of such writers as Proust or Joyce or Kafka has become as highbrow and aloof as any other genre.

The hope persists that, somehow, in the fullness of time, either through the Grace of a revolutionary state or, gradually, through the dissemination of Great Books, the values of advanced art can be sifted down to the mass. But this is a pathetic consolation, Whitman's booster optimism turned rancid. It may have some validity in the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

case of *kitsch* art exemplified in best-selling novels, jukebox adaptations of Tchaikovsky, choral works like "Ballad for Americans" or "Freedom Train," modern dancing in Broadway musicals, etc., that petty-bourgeois "uplift" by which Americans punish themselves for really preferring Moon Mullins. (And, incidentally, the type of culture fostered in the Soviet Union today by fiat of its most authoritative critics.) The base forms of mass art have autonomous values and a parallel momentum of their own. Moreover, their pervasive power is such, like the political slogans of authoritarian states, that any influence is most likely in the reverse direction. Neither the bohemian ghetto nor the university provide a hiding place.

When comic strips, jazz, pulp fiction and the rest are not intellectually snubbed, they are regarded as the bastard products of modern civilization, mere artifacts like juke boxes and slot machines, without any cultural ancestry or tradition. Their lineaments of descent, however, are unmistakable. Just as the leading forms of bourgeois art were derived from medieval sources—the novel from feudal *gestes* and romances, the drama from miracle and morality plays performed in the market place, etc.—so these new upstart genres are grounded in middle-class culture of the past. To trace even one of them back to its origins, the comic strip for example, reveals certain early characteristics that apply to all.

2.

During the first half of the eighteenth century in England, a period which saw the consolidation of British mercantile power and the establishment of the Protestant ascendancy, there was a new security of person and a freedom of opinion that was shared by all but the lowest classes. That vertical chain or ladder of Being on which feudalism had based its cosmology and its hierarchical social relations was about to be tipped over on its horizontal axis by a levelling of class values. The *canaille* were now citizens with a stake in Parliament and even an interest in the arts. Common Sense—that great virtue of the average—was elevated to a rank as high as all the others. God himself, turning the screws of an erector set universe constructed according to the rational blueprint of Newton and Leibnitz, could have no patience with any monkish hyperdulia or aesthetic faradiddle.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The five great comic novelists of England, Smollett, Fielding, Stern, Richardson and Defoe, as well as the cockney artist Hogarth, appeared at this time almost in a group. All of them had an intimate connection with early journalism, sharing its time-sense as a series of discrete moments, each without self-possession, as well as its notion of the "concrete" as residing in the particular entity or event sensorily observed. The scenes and actions of Smollett's novels, especially, frequently resemble detached anecdotes taken from a newspaper or magazine of the period. With their tortuous plots unwinding upon the spool of a foregone conclusion; their crude characterizations drawn almost to the point of caricature; and their uncertain structure wavering between the narrative and the informal essay (just as the journals of the time wavered between reporting and editorializing); yet with everything drawn in bright color, full of slapstick vigor and spiked with climaxes—these early novels could hardly hope to compete for literary esteem with poetry or drama. On the other hand, by their rootedness in the common daily life they had immense appeal, and achieved an audience for literature greater than any before.

During the same period, this new mass audience was shared by the cartoon art of William Hogarth and his successors. And in the fusion of the two—the early English novel of Smollett and Fielding and Hogarth's drawings—the style of the comic strip was conceived.

Hogarth's declared purpose in his little-known book, *The Analysis of Beauty,* was "to treat (his) subjects as a dramatic writer." What he did achieve for the first time in "The Rake's Progress," "Marriage a la Mode," "The Harlot's Progress," and his other cartoon series, was, in effect, a translation of novelistic situations and character types into pictures. (Of course the medieval paintings and stained-glass windows illustrating Bible stories and the lives of the Saints for the laity preceded Hogarth; but these had a religious rather than a social perspective, as, also, miracle and morality plays compared with Elizabethan drama.) Hogarth's ambition was not to methodize nature, but to see her in all her literalness and materiality—to strip the Quattrocento ideal of any mysticism and reduce it to a physical average. In his work, the knobs, twists and bulges of flesh of ordinary mankind superceded the perfect forms of Venus and Apollo. Yet as he came to understand later on, the concept of the Average was an ideal as abstract as the concept of the Beautiful.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Hogarth served to widen the split between "high" and "low" art, reflected during the eighteenth century by the more academic dispute between the Ancients and the Moderns. For those artists surrounding the official court painter Joshua Reynolds, and for the "connoiseurs," so called, who admired the Italian schools exclusively, he could never restrain his contempt. There was, unmistakably, the bray of the true philistine horselaugh in the way Hogarth ridiculed the claims to "divine inspiration" and the *"Je ne sais quoi"* or Grace, of these artists. His own compositions were often cramped with detail and unbalanced; and his line was coarse, enclosing rather than revealing form, so that his pictures actually improve when they are reduced in size for publication. All his immense inventive genius was restricted by default to the depiction of a literary subject matter:—caricatures of London daily life, both high and low, as seen from the inside.

But since satire and caricature were the dominant modes of art in the eighteenth century, Hogarth was eminently fitted for his age. The social order of England at that time had such stable foundations, (or thought it had), that the distortions of view in Hogarth's pictures, like the crazy-mirror expansions and contractions in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* or Pope's *Rape of the Lock* could easily be refocused and adjusted to the norm. The artist's "slant" was his point of view. Hogarth even posited a standard "line of beauty," the serpentine line or spiral, which was for him the secret grace of the Greek and Italian styles; but, when this spiral twist was flattened or bulged or distorted in any way, it emerged in the shape of caricature. The deviant, the non-average, was also the freakish that could provoke either laughter or disgust, according to the intent of the artist. And, as his pictures show, the wit of connecting "improper" forms in caricature was equal to the wit of connecting "improper" ideas and images in satire.

With this, the general theory underlying the comics was about complete. Hogarth's successors and imitators gradually abandoned his moralistic tone as well as his hopeless battle with the "connoisseurs." His cartoon art was endowed to the daily newspaper rather than to the museum. The development of illustration and caricature by Rowlandson, Cruikshank, Gilray, Seymour and the rest coincided with the growth of modern journalism in Europe and America. By the time Outcalt's "Yellow Kid" appeared in the New York *World* in 1896—generally considered the first of its kind—an embryo comic strip art

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was already gestating which, upon the consolidation of mass newspapers and syndicates by Pulitzer and Hearst, emerged at last full-grown in the way we know.

3.

Those visionary figments—Mutt and Jeff, Smilin' Jack, Blondie, Dick Tracy, Daisy Mae, The Gumps, Popeye, Moon Mullins—every day, exposed in their boxes of light and jails of purposeless energy, they glow in the minds of millions. The services they perform and the needs they fulfill are real. Like the newspapers themselves, the comic strips re-enact a vast and solemn American ritual—The Strip Tease of Time. With each issue, suspense is aroused and discharged in a little climax without relief, anticipating only another climax tomorrow and tomorrow, until, just before the final black-out, time's overwhelming secret is almost but never revealed and always hidden again. As the goal or reward of a culture founded on materialism is the very activity taken to reach it, so the comic strip leads to no final revelation and exhausts itself in immediacy. Its rigid daily pattern is repeated in an overall timeless and shapeless continuum.

And not only the comic strip, but also jazz, soap opera, the movies, pulp fiction have this one great structural principle (or lack of principle) in common. As a consequence, any criticism of the mass arts based on the authority of traditional art, is baffled from the start. From the standpoint of organic form, the various genres of mass culture seem closer to artifacts than to art.

To attempt a formal definition of the comic strip, therefore, would be a contradiction in terms, since the very concept of form in art entails unity of time and space and action. Its form—as for the movies, pulp fiction, jazz and the rest—is really formula, whose prescription never varies. Jazz, whether hip or commercial, from blues to be-bop, must serve out its time constricted behind the thirty-two bars of the average record; although, during a performance, it can be extended indefinitely by the addition of new choruses or longer rides. As for the movies, the conventions of plot and character are always so rigid that the circular continuum of feature to newsreel to double feature can be breached at any point without loss. No wrench is suffered during this transition by the audience, which arrives and departs in the same darkness. And in soap opera and serialized

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

pulp fiction, the comic strip device of the strip tease in time is used to provide suspense and direction in a plot going nowhere. But since the strip tease can never be pared down to its essence, these are never formally completed but, rather, discontinued or exhausted.

Moving always on the surface of appearance, it is impossible for any of the mass arts to plunge beneath this surface and into a depth of meaning, symbolic or anagogic, which form alone provides.* For this reason, the casts of characters in comic strips, like the stock types in pulp fiction and the stars of Hollywood, who always play themselves in whatever roles they are cast, are mere concretions of characteristics, animated types or "humours" rather than persons. All these characters are self-contained, hermetically sealed by the formula from any growth or change. Once set in motion, they can go on and on for years in a kind of somnambule inviolability.

The most successful and famous comics often survive their authors, and, in rare cases, even the newspapers where they first appeared. It takes a major change in the American *ethos* to effect even a slight alteration in their formulae. But when, after many years, one of these strips recasts its characters and plot, or expires, that is an event as significant as a style of dress or slang going out of fashion. The cocky, sadistic, tough-talking "Yellow Kid" of the 1890's—from whose name, incidentally, the term "yellow journalism" is derived—has been superceded by the still more violent, sophisticated and sensational comics of our own time, just as the old-fashioned demagogy of Pulitzer and Hearst has been streamlined by their successors. In modern comic books and newspaper strips, read by all classes and age-groups with equal fervor, there is such great emphasis on mayhem, arson, murder and pathological sex as to necessitate laws for the protection of public morality. "Krazy Kat," "Happy Hooligan," "Mutt and Jeff" and "The Katzenjammer Kids" were products of a more genteel era that has passed away. Sometimes, however, a comic strip remains embalmed in the juices of another time,

* The symbolic devices of certain movies, such as the white gulls in *Potemkin* intended to express freedom, or the Freudian emblems in other "art" films (described by Arnold Hauser in his article "Can 'Movies' Be Profound?" in P.R. Jan. '48), are of a different order from those in painting and literature. They should be regarded instead as cues calculated to arouse a definite response from the audience, as, e.g., a dog howling to evoke foreboding, or a baby gurgling to evoke maternal sympathy.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

unable to renew itself, yet too valuable a property to be abandoned. "Maggie and Jiggs," for example, a strip burlesquing the social *gaffes* and foibles of the immigrant *nouveau riche,* has lost much of its point now that the upper and middle classes have learned to forget their manners. In any event, none of the really important old-timers are ever forgotten. Their names and typical wisecracks color the daily speech, and their faded pictures merge gradually into the family album of American life where they are preserved.

For it is the great indistinction of both the mass arts and contemporary life that they reflect one another so closely, feature by feature, it is almost impossible to tell the image from its source. Both collaborate to form a common myth, that vague gray area of the "collective unconscious," where psychoanalysis and sociology overlap one another. The fictive heroes of this myth are the archetypes to which the masses try to conform, and the dies from which they stamp their own behavior. Consider the style of the city gangster, in all his synthetic moods, from the brash hood to the smooth operator; the style of the strong and silent Western cowboy; the style of the country Gable and the hick siren; the style of the Cynical reporter on a metropolitan newspaper; the style of the Woman-with-a-past and her fallen sister, the Whore-with-a-heart-of-gold; and the characters that kids throughout the U.S. assume when they play at War or Cops and Robbers or Cowboys and Indians—all are derived, to a greater or lesser degree, from the classic types of the movies, pulp fiction and comic strips. But with this demurrer—the spell cast by the these mythical images would be broken, their charm unwound, without the simple faith of the masses.*

As the power of the religious and artistic value has shrunken, the mass arts have taken over. The collapse of Puritanism, for example, has opened a vacuum in the interior lives of millions—the secret world of the daydream and the forbidden wish—which is now filled almost entirely by the sexual codes, styles of courtship, and erotic images derived from the mass arts. Even the comic strips exhibit women as

* During the war, the type of Rover Boy beach charger and fire fighter celebrated by Hollywood was an open scandal in every camp, but too shocking and too ludicrous to be taken seriously, almost like the war itself. And, for another example, those great lovers of the silent screen, Valentino, Theda Bara, John Gilbert, et al., seem to be playing in a farce when they are shown today.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lush as those of the beer and cigarette ads; while some like "The Gumps" and "Winnie Winkle," where sex was once a minor display, have had to be revamped to satisfy their public. (The formulas of new strips concerned with aviation, such as "Terry and the Pirates" or "Smilin' Jack," place equal emphasis on sex—new evidence, perhaps, for Freud's theory of the dream symbolism of flying.) In Hollywood, an elaborate and knowing technique has been developed, known in the trade as the "continental touch," in order to keep within the bounds of propriety, and for an audience quick to take a hint. As a result, the provinces today are as cultivated as the large cities.

Romantic and confessional pulp fiction, the most lurid as well as the tender adolescent varieties, employ the same conventions as Hollywood but affect a kind of mincing virtue which is all their own. Under all the romantic persiflage, however, there is a bond of understanding between author and reader not to take it all too seriously. Love is a bedtime story, but sex is real and earnest. Nevertheless, the readers of *A Girl Can Dream* by Phyllis Pool, *Appointment with Love* by Clinton Dangerfield, *Banished to Paradise* by Blake Reed, etc., shop girls, school girls, stenographers, housewives in their millions demand to see themselves as heroines of romance along with the queens and grand-dames of the past. Romantic love has been democratized in these magazines and sold on every newsstand. The ads on the back pages, however, are a pathetic commentary and as real as a dirty joke—ads for Loans, Cures for Stammering, Foot Powder for tired feet, Reduce! Pictures of your favorite Hollywood stars, Stop B.O., and so on.

The moonshine of these romances derives from the movies, from Hollywood, where the stars like gods and goddesses of a new Olympus merely play at being human. Their love affairs among themselves and, sometimes, with favored mortals outside the movies, recounted years later around every American fireside, bar and soda fountain are already part of our national folklore. The stock characters of romantic pulp—and of Western, Detective, Sport and Horror stories as well—are only copies of these larger-than-life originals in Hollywood. There the daydream is given a local habitation and a name.

Accordingly, what was at first joined only as a metaphor—the Hollywood constellation and the Pantheon of ancient Greece—now present certain real points of contact. The stars of Hollywood can

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

be conceived as archetypes existing apart from us, in a preternatural dimension of their own, for the images on the screen are ikons rather than photographic representations of real persons. In this sense, Clark Gable and Lana Turner are merely actors who represent CLARK GABLE and LANA TURNER. These great shadow-gods, entering our lives in all the guises of Zeus—the Swan, the Bull, and the Shower of Gold—and their goddesses, with their smooth, lovely faces unlined by any trace of anxiety or intelligence, together living, loving and dying but always rising again on other screens in other films, immortal and grand, what have they in common with our own petty cares and interests or even, for that matter, with the lives of the actors who portray them? The archetypes persist under many transmogrifications even when the actors who originally portrayed them are dead. Their cosmetic masks are forever renewed. Yet the gossip columns and picture magazines where the stars are worshipped, and the press agents who are their priests, all conspire to identify these ideal images with the physical beings of actors and actresses. And for the millions who surrender themselves and surrogate their passion to these images in clay-dreams or (with their eyes closed), even in the very act of love, they are more real than the bodies they are possessed by or they themselves possess.

The star system undoubtedly is the most original invention of the movies—in a synecdochal sense, it contains and *is* the movies. European film studios, which have been unable to develop a comparable system of their own, seem to lack the glamor and enchantment of Hollywood. American movies are preferred by the masses even in foreign countries; and this despite the handicap of a strange language and the fact that, from the standpoint of theater art, French and English films are often superior. An actor in foreign films, whether from the Comedie Française or from the Abbey Theater, is merely an actor, but Betty Grable in America is a star. Hollywood can ingest directors, writers, technicians and actors into its thearchy, "the finest that money can buy," with the same divine and imperious appetite with which the Olympians must have devoured the local deities of Greece. It is only after elaborate rites of beatification by press agents, gossip columnists and movies magazines, however, and the further proof of their box-office magic, that the taint of Europe and mortality can be washed away. In this manner, after changes of name, per-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sonality, and appearance, some of the highest stars have ascended in Hollywood. American actors, however, whose features might stamp them as minority racial types, are condemned to roles of a sinister and/or sophisticated kind.

The Italians suffer mainly from this prejudice. Jewish film stars are frequently able to "pass" without special observance; but, in the parts of Jews, they are restricted to standardized *schmaltz* characterizations, unctuous, self-conscious, and embarrassed by a fulsome desire to please. On the other hand, it is almost impossible for a Negro to play a romantic or heroic part in the movies. Even the best Negro players are invariably shown as domestic servants or musical clowns or the butts of ridicule—the same roles, incidentally, which were bestowed on the lower classes in Elizabethan drama. What motivates these restrictions is as much political as it is financial. For the collective daydream of Hollywood is as jealous and exclusive as the individual's; and the rise of a new romantic star from a minority race or nationality signifies a rise in social rank for the whole group.

As it has developed, the mythopoeic power of the movies, inherent in its very method, has given it a quasi-religious status and a structure that differs radically from any other literary or theatrical genre. As the anecdote is the concrete substance of the short story and novel; gossip of the drama; soliloquy of the modern poem; so the daydream, with its moving images beamed inside the mind, is the concrete substance and focal point of the movies. The movie theater itself is like a working model, or templet, of a huge mind. While the brilliant hypnotic screen converges all light and movement in the darkness, a simple faith on the part of the audience ("the camera never lies"), suspends any disbelief in the projected reality of what it sees—for both the private darkness within and the public darkness of the theater are illuminated at once by the same image. What a machine for the cretinization of the masses! The deadpan with which the camera records its pictures is like the reassuring legal prose of Kafka's dream narratives, whereby, keeping a straight face, the most incredible characters and events are detailed with such a consistently monotonous gravity of emphasis that the fantastic can be taken at its face value. Conversely, the matter-of-fact events shown in the newsreels of Senators speaking, flood waters rising in Iowa, famines in China, etc., are somehow transformed to the same illusory plane as the fea-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ture production itself. The shadows of the movies flicker between the black and white world of positive fact and the chrome world of fantasy, unreeling both on a single beam of light. But this spooky lighting effect is a device of ritual much older than the movies:—

Darkness in churches congregates the sight;
Devotion strays in open daring light,

as a poet observed in the seventeenth century. The silver screen, the hush, the darkness—it *is* a kind of secret Mass where all who attend partake of the Host in common; and, to project along this line into the near future, the movies may yet find in television a comparable Reformation, in which the individual will be left to face his own screen alone.

Whatever style television may ultimately compose for itself is now hidden in a primal chaos of all styles, a super-Vaudeville large enough to include the movies, sports events, grand opera and news events all on the same bill. The earliest films, in turn, were little more than photographic imitations of stage plays or circus tricks, agitated dumb-shows, until the camera learned to move and to participate in the action. But from this discovery emerged the great motif of The Chase, a motif which is dominant in Chaplin's early comedies, Westerns, cops and robbers melodramas, cartoons, etc., and, in one way or another, figures in almost every kind of film. The Chase was not only a fulfillment of style, but, even more, created a ritual form out of a mass psychological need. In the spellbound attention with which a newsreel audience watches a football player running and twisting down a broken field away from hands that clutch at him from all sides, there is, under all the excitement and tension, a release from the common nightmare of being pursued by someone or something with the pursuer gaining closer and closer. It is almost as though time itself were the pursuer, that "cinematic" time (to use Bergson's appropriate metaphor), conceived as an absolute, free and mathematical essence with an existence of its own. What better place for the apotheosis of our "cinematic" time than in the movies?

The name of Benjamin Franklin glows on the marquee, appearing as The First American. For his many indigenous qualities, but, especially, for having made a fetish of time, which is money, everyman's commodity, the stuff of life, Franklin was recognized by Europe as the representative type of a different *ethos*. During his lifetime,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of course, the main outlines of this ethos were still obscure. But by now the American fetishism of time has exposed itself through many nerves of anxiety—e.g., the obsessive dread of losing one's youth or virility, the dread of growing older without "having lived" (Rip Van Winkle), the dread of missing one's chance or "golden opportunity," etc. It is no contradiction, however, that Progress is conceived to be as steady, irresistible and cumulative a process as the ticking of a clock. The new *must* be better, for the same reason that the go-getter *must* come out ahead—or else something is radically wrong. The comic strip "Moon Mullins" provides a negative sort of testimony for this credo—Moon, a character in the old picaresque tradition, never does any work, sleeps too much, chases after women, wastes his money and never thinks of tomorrow. But to balance Moon, at the other end of the evolutionary scale there is "Buck Rogers," "Flash Gordon," and, of course, "Superman," Tarzan's city bred and more neurotic cousin, who can hear a dripping faucet miles away.

Now the most remarkable fulfillment of these notions of time and progress in the mass arts is, certainly, science-fiction (so-called), whose lineage goes back to Lucian, Kepler, Donne and Swift; yet, paradoxically, this literary tradition has been crossed with the still more ancient ghost story, to produce something essentially different from either and peculiar to our own times, a scientific demonology. The faith of the masses in scientific progress, which has largely superceded faith in Biblical revelation, can call up its own superstitions of the possible as terrifying as those of the occult. In *Astounding Stories, Wonder Stories, Amazing Stories* and the like, the demons and devils that once haunted mankind have been driven thousands of light years away into the interstellar regions where anything goes. But this is where the paradox unfolds itself—for, to the superstitious mind, the farthest movements of the stars and the innermost movements of the soul (exemplified by the pseudo-science of astrology), are the two poles of one axis.

One of the most original writers of Gothic science-fiction, H. P. Lovecraft (whose paranoid tales of the pre-creation race of Chthulu are in many ways reminiscent of the old Kabbalistic legend of the Breaking of the Vessels), was so possessed by sub-conscious demons that, like W. B. Yeats in *A Vision,* he even invented an elaborate list of Chthulu tracts and incunabula to buttress his stories. Their names

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

could be recited at a black Mass:—1) The Micronomicon of the Mad Arab, Abdul Alhazred; 2) Pnakotic manuscripts; 3) R'lyeh text; 4) Book of Dzyan; 5) Seven Cryptical Books of Hsan; 6) Dhol Chants. In his public life, Lovecraft was a respected citizen of Providence, R.I. and, like many of his profession, declared himself to be an orthodox "mechanical materialist."

The bulk of the science-fiction stories published in pulp magazines—in distinction from the more sophisticated varieties—have, by now, evolved a set of conventions so widely accepted that their fantastic plots can be told straight, without any literary sleight-of-hand, like the tales of ghosts in the Middle Ages. The casts of characters in these stories are cut from the same pattern as Western or Romantic pulp: there is the hero himself (who is the usual daydream hero), an evil scientist (who could be a cattle rustler or suave nightclub operator as well), and, inevitably, a good scientist and his beautiful daughter. Formula proscribes form. And neither space ships, ray blasters, time machines or all the rest of their Gothic furniture can raise them above the level of pulp fiction.

For any of the mass arts, questions of aesthetic value are supererogatory. But the uncertain cultural status of science-fiction, ranging as it does from high to low, presents a problem in criticism that applies to all: namely, whether a transvaluation of the mass arts can be effected, while still maintaining their democratic base, so as to make them serve as vehicles of advanced art. What this really entails is that both halves of our schizoid culture be joined and made whole by an act of the artistic will. In the past, of course, folk songs and country dances were formally developed in the symphonies of Beethoven and Schubert, and the old popular ballads recast in the poems of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Yet the poetry and music of the Romantic era was no more available to the broad mass of people then, than it is now; and, in any case, the natural forms of ballads, folk songs and country dances were derived from the same organic principles as traditional art, which are essentially opposed to the technological art products of our own time. To attempt to anneal the two, therefore, even if it were socially possible, would result in an aesthetic hippogriff, a prodigy as strange as any Shakespearean marriage of the Phoenix and the Turtle.

Those experiments of Stravinsky and Gershwin, while appearing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to offer a structural synthesis, are really a hangover of late Romantic "program music"—(the equivalent of *collage* in painting)—in which bird calls, cannon shots, cow bells, train whistles, etc., were sounded off to counterfeit reality. These works may be musically successful notwithstanding, but jazz has its own ways and its own means. By a reciprocal process, when jazz bands strain to achieve a larger statement by imitating symphonic forms, as in Duke Ellington's suite *Ebony Concerto,* the result is foredoomed to be a humorless parody of both. The movies, infected by the same notions, tend to produce elephantine spectacles or mere photographed versions of stage plays; and comic strips, likewise, when they abandon their cartoon style for devices of chiaroscuro and realistic drawing, resemble the *kitsch* illustrations in *Good Housekeeping* or *The Saturday Evening Post.* Limits and rules, even for the mass arts, define themselves by an excess of their own ends.

So then, to recapitulate what has been assumed all along: the base forms of popular culture have an autonomous system of values indifferent to the standards of artistic criticism, and a career separate from that of traditional Western art. As a corollary to the "cinematic" time sense which they embody, all are committed by formula to the appearance of things presented by immediate sensation. And since, by definition, it is impossible for them to evaluate experience by means of form, the glass they hold up to modern life is a mirror that focuses certain aspect sharply but reflects nothing in depth. It is this two-dimensionality that makes them seem closer to artifacts than to art.

4.

Along the midway of our Coney Island culture is jazz or ragtime or blues or swing or be-bop, of many names but one homoousian substance. The nature of jazz music has not been treated in any detail so far, and yet, in a sense, it may be considered a prototype of all the mass arts. For in no other are ideas and feelings presented for their immediate effect at the very moment of conception, nor are the restrictions of formula so exacting and necessary. Only the 2-4-2-4 structure and the 32 set bars of jazz can control the vagaries of improvisation. Consequently, these crude arrangements of popular tunes, stamped out as though by a machine to fit the time of a dance or

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the length of a record, are in contrast to highly complex rhythms and elaborately figured variations of theme. Many jazzmen, who may be virtuosos on their own instruments, are yet unable to read even the simplest musical score.

Jazz arrangements are usually devised beforehand by the band leader-entrepreneur, but the performance itself is a corporate activity in which the inspiration of each musician is pooled. The American system of checks and balances in a free enterprise system has no better working model. Those jam sessions where musicians get together after hours to play for their own satisfaction constitute an open market for the mutual exchange of ideas. Any new "riff" or "break" of value becomes the property of anyone present and is quickly passed on—one reason why the most original innovations in jazz are often anonymous. As ideas catch and connect, an altogether new style of playing, such as be-bop, can suddenly emerge as though it were "in the air" all the time, the air the trumpet or saxaphone man blows through his mouthpiece.

European mimicry of American jazz, especially the French with their quaint Hot Clubs, can never quite approximate its tone. Their very aesthetic seriousness is un-American and gives them away. The brass toughness and disreputable history of jazz(whose origins among the Negroes in the South can be traced to slave plantations, gambling boats on the Mississippi, the dives and cathouses of old New Orleans and Memphis, up to the seamier clip-joints along Fifty-Second Street and in the Harlem ghetto, where it is now enshrined (not to mention its sinister association with drugs and late hours), all this has flattered even the most prosaic Local 802 hipster with a kind of Villon-esque underworld glamour. Among the coteries that surround jazz, a distinctive jabberwocky composed of carnival slang, thieves' argot and Harlem jive has been cultivated, in order to separate the hipsters from the squares.

But at this point certain further distinctions ought to be made. Black jazz, the only chaste and true variety, is but a narrow band at the extreme end of the Tin Pan Alley spectrum, the rest of which ranges from the mixed pied-piper outfits of Benny Goodman or Woody Herman, all the way around to the huge all-white orchestras of Tommy Dorsey, Glen Gray and Harry James. For these last, the commercial bands that blare on the radio and in the movies, jazz improvi-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sation is ruled out altogether, and every number is rehearsed and mechanically regulated to the smallest crotchet. Yet it is mainly the loudest and most vulgar which are most popular throughout the U.S., perhaps for that reason; while the best colored jazzmen, from whose work all the others are derived, are kept waiting in the kitchen of American success. In Hollywood's recurrent jazz operas, Negro musicians are rushed in and out as discreetly as waiters. By some absurd double irony, however, the great majority of the Negro population penned in the Northern and Midwestern ghettos actually prefer bleached imitations of commercial jazz or even the white varieties themselves—driven by the same levelling pressure of the Boss culture that makes them straighten their hair or value lighter colored women as more sexually desirable; as, for whites of second-class nationalities, it compels many to change their names, their manners, their religions, or even their faces.

But the absorption of Negro jazz by the Leviathan is only one sign of its power. For the American mass culture is also an imperial culture, whose authority is as great abroad as it is at home. It is no exaggeration to state that it occupies a comparable relation to its ethos as Protestantism once held for the British Empire, or the classic Pantheon for ancient Greece and Rome. The base forms of mass culture are capable of undercutting the most rooted traditions of art and religion in Europe, not by any competition of values—they are aesthetically neutral—but because, on the broadest social level, these traditions are already exhausted. The Soviet Union, which would like to fill this vacuum with its own imperial prescriptions, carries on a steady, virulent offensive against American movies, comics and jazz.

In its present setup, however, mass culture is not necessarily confined within the matrix of contemporary society, for it can operate with equal or even greater efficiency under a totalitarian as under a democratic system. Its nature is so closely bound to technology that no one can predict what new shapes and genres it may yet evolve. The real artist behind American culture is Vulcan himself, the great artificer surpassing all his old devices year after year. The invention of television, for example, has at once confined movies, comics, spectator sports and even newspapers within the scope of a single screen and enlarged their view enormously. And there is always a new ride or a new sideshow down the midway.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

In contrast, the traditional arts of Europe are gradually freezing into a museum culture, with the trophies of the past hung side by side with those of the present. It has even been suggested seriously, by Malraux and others, that reproductions of the greatest art works in Paris and other capital cities be circulated around remote areas—a sort of French "Freedom Train" for artistic documents—as though this funereal exhibition could substitute for the creative energies of a living art. After the first World War, such piety toward past values would have seemed a ridiculous excess; but Dadaism and Surrealism could afford to paint the moustache on Mona Lisa only because these values were still viable.

Of course, works of art of a high order, equal to the best of the past, can still be produced, though increasingly rarified, professional and aloof. For the tradition begun with the Renaissance is ending. As the advanced arts have surpassed themselves in the refinement of sensibility even to the point of nullity—the blank page of Mallarmé and the empty canvas of Mondrian—so the mass arts have become more violently sensational and garish. Following parallel directions, both lead to an equal exhaustion. The humanistic and scientific tradition of the Renaissance, of which American mass culture is the ultimate product, has strained itself over the centuries to lay those eggs slowly hatching under the deserts of New Mexico.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fredrick Brantley

SEASONAL TERROR

When boys through sun and falling leaves peer
From masks for quaint witches' night, and lancing
Light falls, and old men progress our rich dreams
Nightly—then know, old men (whose fine old blood
Into blood you drew spills in stately mingling
While you worship—our dream!—in time's nave),
We do exult as poplars burn, as now we learn
Death is not God's great error.
And I am loosed unto my beast of terror.

Yet the dog death snarls and yaps in the snow,
Snow drifting with love on our loveless houses.
Though in halls below our blind ghosts walk,
We take to airy towers where once we caught
Not wind but haunted mind thudding windward.
Foul winter days, foul all ways, and but pity
To howl down all our cold nights and days.
When ice a self-love does mirror,
Drowsing, I bed down with my beast of terror.

Spring brings vengeance to the living small:
Mice, tigers and sour ladies wrung by love.
All leap through murderous arcs, and soft paws
Claw the dry heart of the world, tearing
Till blood flows, washes their fury in a green
And budding peace. Pale fleeing man mourns.
Deep in my night I spring at the bitter gods.
A trembling novice in my error
To fear, alas, I slay my beast of terror.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Tennessee Williams

TUESDAY'S CHILD

My brother Jack was wild.
That's frequently the case with Tuesday's child
who has the gift of grace and no gift other—
But I
have had no lover.

Iron numerals give the address, and the year's
engraved, not written.
I was three times bitten,
by frost and a neighbor's dog and a cousin's child—
Once felt a touch that burned through my heart's cover
but could not speak nor move away nor turn . . . .
I have no lover.

My brother Jack was wild
with mistresses that circled him like moons,
one black, one gold,
one turning early gray,
and while the piper's waiting for his pay
he still will play the most bewitching tunes!
But I
have had no lover.

My brother Jack is wild.
He watches leaping things and things that fly
and distances that hounds or falcons cover.
But I have watched a spider in the sky
that spins grey lace as patiently as I
wait for my brother. . . .

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Edward McGehee

THE PHOTOGRAPH'S IF*

For a man, I be saying to myself, he don't have no single earthborn right to famish none after what he ought to know from the start he ain't gwine to get. Now just tell me. What shape, what echo of man would I be, if I'd slandered my Sire to you? Keeping myself busy defaming him only because he felt the need of having dusty feet and he went off and left us bairns to hustle-up our own gruel, and all the while the rheum in our eyes as thick, mind you, as peas porridge cold, which with us warn't ever nine days old, and us slipping into the rack and ruin of them harsh, craggy, Highland winters. Some man I'd be, man, if from the nigh to foremost lick I didn't tell you how I've done gradually come aware of why he felt he had to do it.

His blood warn't so made he could settle down none, but cause it warn't, I don't be placing it against him none. His wanting to wander around and to see new lands; to canoodle here and love 'em up yonder; to sing wanton ditties and to be flowing over, exactly like a thawy crick, with lascivious dalliances as he'd sashay all the sonsy doxies he could rub his mitts on as they went up and down the dancing halls, their feets a-kilting in figure eights. To muss-up a woman's placket and to harry her good and proper? Why, man, that was his greatest pleasure out of living; skittling a woman, I supposes, meant nothing bad to him, being how he could find another one in any clime.

I knows now how it must have been with him. I got some of it in meself. And I's telling you, it ain't all hindmost. Not by a long shot. It's no task at all for me to see him bestriding a pipe of malmsey what was originally grown in Didyme, a-scratching at his cooties and

* An excerpt from "Face to Face," a novel in progress. The time is before the Civil War. The speaker is addressing his two brothers and a daguerrotyper.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a-recounting to the sailor boys what he done, and when it war, and where.

He sent word back to us only twice. Once it war when he'd come over here to Charles Town Harbour. From there 'bouts he shipped south on a bark, but those good-for-nothing, those black-legged Spaniards got 'em. Most likely he must have been as slimy as a toadfish to get out of their clutches; but he did, and then he skedaddled across that there Isthmus with his pyx, full of medicines, a-slung over his right shoulder and then over his left, all in an easing of his weariment. When he had to machete his way through those jungles of vines and macaw palms, and at night-time kept hisself busy trying to go to sleep, with the squeals of them marmosets and howling tities and monstrous serpents lisping all around him and toucans pecking away at him, he might have been wishing round about that time he'd been more of a stay-at-home man, where it would have been a pinnace, her hair all askew, who whispered in his ears and bit 'em, rather than a swarm of gnats. Which reminds me.

Have you heard the one they be telling around about here how that loafer what was leaning up against the theader sign said to the mosquitoes, "Stick no bills here"? Well slap my dangly old whang-doddle, but don't you think that one's funny?

Now that other time we heard about our Sire, he was last seen a-washing his loins in the Ganges. I'd be a niggard of a man, for sure, wouldn't I, if I couldn't see why he'd rather do that than put up with all the moil and cries what he used to hear a-bouncing up and over them-there walls of Edinburgh's tolbooth? With that prickado aptness of his for women-folk, I sure can understand why as a lad he wanted to be an accoucheur.

An accoucheur. You mean you don't know what one of them is? Where you been sleeping all your life, man? It's a man what is a midwife, and our Sire, he got his Licentiate in Midwifery from the University of Glasgow. But he must have made too many of his patients, what weren't already in that state but only female-wanted to be, thick with child. That's how it come about that we was born in jail.

That's exactly right. They cotched him. The law—it's sho strange, when you come to reckon with it and try to find out how it wants to work.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But before I got waylaid on our Sire's life, I was starting to tell you how we's just arrived in Carthage ourselves. It's a mighty get-up-and-going burg, don't you think? We told ourselves, when we come of age, *No suh, by bloody Jasus,* we couldn't put up with that living any more. Maybe it's only the ghostish shadow of our Sire what goes before us, likened unto the almighty God who got busy and told His chosen folk, and He told 'em without any bamboozlement, mind you, that a cloud and a pillar of fire would lead them out of the land of that wicked old Pharaoh, out of Old Poker's Jewry, into a land of promise what would everywhere be everlasting. Now, He didn't appear to us none, but this, this other, it's the clotie's rhyme and reason for why we come.

And our coming be the reason for my talking with you now. This is what I want to be knowing. In this here town's *Halcyon,* we read how there's a traveling daguerreotypist what's sot up here for business in a Daguerrian Room. We've got our nags bracked to the stand down yonder in front of the Eagle Hotel, and we've set our steps straight-forward and arseversy up and down this here thoroughfare and, to this minute, we ain't laid nairy an eye, not one out of our six, on his stopping place, has we? Now would you be knowing his whereabouts? Cognomen of Decambreau, ain't it Hardiman?

Jumping jehoshaphat. Don't be pussywinking me any more like all that. Why imagine me asking you, of all folks, how we could find the man and all this time you're the man hisself. Reckon though I didn't give you much of a chance to tell us who you be. You can hear I likes to talk, I reckon, but if I ain't too polished in the genteel art, it's caused by the fact that the three of us, we ain't never had any mollycoddling done to us. Not with our Sire wandering round the world, and sending word back to us only twice, and us wondering, to this day, if he be still alive. I don't imagine old age would be much of a pleasure for him, not suffering with the usual old-man male-troubles. But us three—we couldn't get nairn of the exquisite education what he had hisself. Even so, I be thinking we've got a few manners Mister, or does I call you Monsieur?

Never. No, never in my born days did I think I'd ever get around to talking to a Frenchy this here way. But he seems to be an exception, don't you think, Hardiman? Nothing of a dancing master's mincing ways in him! Likely, you supposes, he's done changed his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

name from a good old English he-name to something like Decambreau?

However, before we go to your shop, Suh, I should like to have the honor of introducing you to my brothers. It's all my pleasure; don't mention it. Mister Decambreau, this is my brother Hardiman and this one is my brother Wellwood, and I. I be Baxter Harpeth. We are the famous three brothers!

What? What do you mean you haven't heard about us? Why Suh, we're legendary! Now just tell me this. Who ever heard speak of any of these old-line families from the seaboard and the piney-wood states what don't have the original three brothers who came sailing to Amerikee to make their fortunes? Why, we're, we're always there. Just like those three Portuguese caravels what old man Columbus thought were following him and made him step on it. Or, maybe we're like those three Fates of antiquity to whom both men and gods were subject, before their God-head securities were done shattered and busted up. Might even be we'll find ourselves shortly nothing more than Mister Knox's and Mister Calvin's foreordination. There's no telling.

But even if I should live, and Hardiman there, and Wellwood —even if all three of us should live to a ripe old-age, we wants to be more than three-aged. I'm the eldest so that's why I'm speaking out for 'em. I don't want; in fact, I never want to hear none of them other folks say, "Hurry back to see us," or, "Come back soon, now." None of that tomfoolery for me. No, no-suhree-bob. In fact, we don't plan to leave. You'd just as well believe me. We has plans to stay around together. It ain't the usual one, I grant, but it's plain as a plan just the same. There'll be no dying at our Meridians for us and kin saying nice and softlike, or hard and cryinglike, "Oh, dear Lord on high, peace be to his Manes!" We don't want any of that belly-washing stuff, no Suh. Not after all this here trouble we've had to get back together again waydown West in this here brand new state of Alybamie.

This, I'm telling you, is how it be with us, right now and right then. We more or less come over here together; leastwise, they'll like to think it was that way, and why, yes, why should we crane our necks out to fool 'em and take away from 'em what they try to live by? But pretty soon after we'd done landed on these here shores and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

we'd done gotten settled, Hardiman, that one be Hardiman, he set out to go over them thar mountains with their rambunctious defiles and draws, didn't you? Towards some barrens in Cantuckie and the buffalo licks in Tennessee, a-gouging with his knuckles all the mountain lions what he met, and a-slashing away at the Indians and the rhododendrons, the wild-grape vines and laurels and the dogwoods what were in his way.

"Bois de flèche?" Is that what you just said?

Let's keep those foreign-sounding words out of this here English conversation. Why, man, this is Amerikee. Amerikee, you gum-chewing, you. . . .

And I'll have you know, Suh, you interrupted me just when I was about to tell you what it is Wellwood's done done. He went down towards those peachtree valleys of Georgia what suck up those red hills into a space no bigger than what a one-room cabin, mayhaps a dog-run at that, a louse, and a still can lean-to on.

While I? Baxter Harpeth. That's my name. Well, I just kinda leaned back in my canebottom and whittled and spat and stayed put on our first acres back yonder in Carolinee. Thought to myself I'd done just about enough gadding about for one man's lifetime. Leave it up to my brothers here and my own chillun—to do any more. But catch me a coney, Suh, we thought we'd better get together again before it was too late. And today? We're seeing each other not for going-on but for the first time in forty-three years, seven months and eighteen days, old and new style, and all of us, we're getting right shaky in our joints, but it don't seem to bother us none. We's all made our respecting journeys in fitten health.

And forty-three years, seven months and eighteen days, you know, that's a powerful lot of new and old moons not to see your own flesh and blood, the nearest thing you've got, specially when it's as strong as our Harpeth blood has come to be. Nigh 'bout tell the time, just by the way it likes to flow. And that's why we decided it'd be just right up our alley if you'd commemorate our reunion for us. Take our picture. That is, we'd like for you to do it, Suh, if it wouldn't make us wince. Just the three of us and this here pinking, skewbald dawg of mine.

Be willing to bet you a million pics Belly-wampus is the best-dawggoned hound dawg you'll ever get to see. You ain't no fice is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

you, Belly-wampus? See him nod his head? That's one smart dawg.

I'm telling you, we's powerful anxious to have our picture took, but old Mister Sun, he sho don't look none too bright to my way of seeing.

The Lord's sakes-alive, but everything is working out just hunky-dory. Brothers, did you hear what Mister Decambreau just said? It looks to me like the two of you has just about forgot all your training and breeding since you've been away from me. If you'd pay attention now, I wouldn't have to repeat so much for your benefit. But once more: Mister Decambreau said the sun don't have to be shining none for him to take a good daguerreotype of us. Makes you wonder for sure what folks'll think up next in this here modern age of miracles. For sure it does, don't it?

I hates to waste my energy just a-walking or a-standing around. If you don't mind, Mister Decambreau, I'll just keep on talking to you while we go to your Room.

Because as we was rocking down there on the front verandah of the Eagle Hotel this morning, trying to catch up on old times, cause it was just after we'd gotten back together again, we, the three of us, we got to puzzling over a fact. Sometime or other our children's children, yes, they may get to boodie wondering if we ever did exist, and if we did, just exactly what we looked like way back then. Hardiman with his walrus whiskers and his pock-mocked nose, and Wellwood with his sloopy stomach—straighten up there, Wellwood—and me with my gold watch made by Mister Cooper hisself in the real, not in any of these fangle-dangle new London towns. It's got a key what is shaped like a rose. Here it is, hanging from this here chain, pure, solid gold, across my chest, and my mammy's hairs, you see? And just so they won't fear none and worry themselves sick over their progenitors, we decided we'd best make a journey and see what you could do for us.

There we'll be. Being head of the family, I think poor Wellwood ought to keep his dignity a little straighter than he's been doing, and you ought to wipe off some of your dandified looks, that is, if they're only skin deep. You didn't used to sport 'em, Wellwood, and I certainly don't approve of the idea of your looking smartalecky for those whose turn it may be to come after us.

Good or bad, we've got to be as straight as any Fencible ever

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was, and our faces, they ought to be as strong as the Auster Wind. We'll throw our shoulders back—I'll have my place in the foreground —and there we'll stand. Straight and nothing chicken-chested about us, standing there in our carved case with its back covered by clusters of rosebuds and our picture protected by the inside velvet facing. You do use velvet for the backings in your pictures, don't you, Suh?

That's all right by me. The velvet, it can fade from black to cream, what with the sunlight streaking through the summer-drawn blinds and petering through the cracked shades, but the three of us, we'll remain indestructible. Lambasting them with our ferocious looks. Know something? It ought to be a mite of fun—taking advantage of that natural right. I'm sure some folks would be skeared to death to have their pictures took, afraid the image could exist only by taking away their own lives. In fact, I've heard tell of some folks who died after it had been forced upon them. But us!

Why, patty-cake. We is doing it of our own accord, ain't we? And I tell you, I'm a-square-looking forward to it, for with all my rearing, I've just about decided, Mister, that's a lot more convenient than Monsieur, Mister Decambreau. The folks I know they don't want to go to Heaven just so they can sit with God and have Mister Calvin, their Jesus, whisper sweet-nothings in their ears for a change from what he used to be saying down around here; they only wants to go so they can lie in their feathers and gossip about the world.

Does you see what I'm doing? I'm giving you, free of charge, some stuff what will make mighty highfalutin talk for these here newspapers. You see what a position we'll be in? Nothing between us and them. Nothing, nothing at all, and they, those ep . . . epony . . . eponymous—don't know why I couldn't say a simple word like that to start with, but those eponymous aristocrats who'll be trying to live off our name, they'll be so proud to remember us they'll have the three of us and Belly-wampus a-sitting in their parlors and a-resting our joints on marble-topped tables, won't they Belly-wampus?

The three of us.

Just imagine it. Us three falderol brothers a-standing inside your frame. Us three sons of a Scottish surgeon what lifted one too many of them lacy-white plackets and let us be born in Edinburgh's tolbooth.

Cause as everyone knows, or leastwise they ought to know, how

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it was a good Scotchman who first said *ars longa, vita brevis,* you know, Mister Decambreau, and I know, and Wellwood knows and Hardiman, he knows too, we can't stay around in person for our great-great-great-and-so-on-and-so-on grandchildren to come along; but even if we can't, I tell you I ain't intending to be done out of any of my rights. Not like a curate I once knew of who was; he lost his bands and his cure cause his most noble Lord would continue to cavort around and commit adultery and still the Lord expected to be given his Communion just like anyone else.

You're not going to begowk us, now are you? No hoodwinking and no tantalizing? We don't want to fade away and all that'll be left of us is a piece of glass what looks as though it had been clouded over with the spray of death. The three of us, we wants to be bright and shining, and you too, you old Belly-wampus.

Naw, Suh. He ain't got no fleas. Not that hound dawg. Would have to be our last night out 'fore getting here, but we was sleeping out in the woods and he just seemed to be itching to get into a fight with that nasty old spotted civet.

All of us wants to keep our own dimensions so's they can see we're eying them. Eying them as soon as we take our picture out to my grandson's farm. That's why we're here. All met here to visit awhile with him, out to his place on the Bogue Chitto Creek. Cotton plantation, and he's done written me that he's got so many good for nothing niggers that they can't seem to do nothing but sit around and fan the breeze. Made a powerful heap of money since he's left his pa's own roof though, and he says how in a few more years he'll build hisself a fine house, right here in town. Look after his farm that-a-way, cause it seems that's what folks do around Carthage. But we wants to have our picture ready to take it out there with us, and if we can't eye all of 'em all the time, at least I think we ought to be able to see 'em now and then. Don't want 'em to forget us, just as I don't be thinking our Sire could ever forget, no matter how far he might have traipsed in a-trying to, the cries what once he used to be hearing up there in the tolbooth, and I'm sure, just as sure as I am that the four of us are walking towards your Room here in Carthage, that our Sire must have woken up at night and thought the parrots and barbets were folks from the lanes running off Princess Street. The folks what were busy getting their earthly punishments.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And even if we be cursed for being buried in a strange land, a Scotchman, he ain't going to forget his blue thistle flower any more than he does his own tooting whistle. In fact, there's one thing 'bout us, Mister Decambreau. Something you might not be a-knowing. Before we sit for you, I might just as well inform you of how we ain't got a speck of greatness in what our iniquities can lie hidden and fallow. We's just plain folks who've tried to do our best by our living, ain't we?

And I, in all my born days, I ain't heard of nairy daguerreotype what could honeyfoggle the honor out of a man's eyes and leave him forlornlike without any spurs to go on his heels. That is—not if he had any honor to start with.

And just as I've heard preacher-folk tell, when they've got a passel of so-called saved sinners a-sitting in the Amen Corner, and some more waiting to name their sins, once the preacher-man's stopped telling how Eve lay there under her tree, with her big, bouncy, naked hips a-crushing the moss all around her, and her eyes full of a beseechment for her cocky little Adam as he was standing there a-flesh-pounding above her, his arm a-lifted to pluck the apple, the nigh to withering apple with its worm of hate, rather than love, a-crawling all through it on all fours and a-crouching, I'm telling you I think we'll be content to wait and see. Just to wait around and see for ourselves how things be.

That's what I said. We'll wait and see. See how it is with 'em. Is, instead of was with us.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

John Berryman

THE POETRY OF EZRA POUND

Since Pound has been for several generations now one of the most famous of living poets, it may occasion surprise that an *introduction* to his poetry, such as I was lately invited to make for New Directions, should be thought necessary at all. It may, but I doubt that it will. Not much candor is wanted for the observation that though he is famous and his poetry is famous his poetry is not familiar, that serious readers as a class have relinquished even the imperfect hold they had upon it fifteen years ago, and regard it at present either with hostility or with indifference. The situation is awkward for the critic. Commonly, when the object of criticism is at once celebrated, unfamiliar, and odious, it is also remote in time; the enquiry touches no current or recent passion. Our case is as different as possible from this enviable condition.

> *In a few years no one will remember the* buffo,
> *No one will remember the trivial parts of me,*
> *The comic detail will be absent.*

After thirty-five years neither comic nor tragic detail is absent. Whatever the critic may wish to say of the poetry runs the risk of being misunderstood as of the poet; one encounters *eager* preconceptions; and no disclaimer is likely to have effect. I make, however, no disclaimer just yet. Let us only proceed slowly—remembering that it is the business of criticism to offer explanations—towards the matter of hostility, beginning with the matter of indifference.

It *is* very surprising, perhaps, that readers of poetry should remain indifferent to the verse of a poet so influential as Pound has been. As one of the dominant, seminal poetries of the age, one would expect readers to want to become acquainted with it as a matter of course. That many do not want to, suggests that they do not in fact

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

so regard it, or regard it as only in some special sense an influence; and I think this is the case. They regard *Pound* as a dominant influence. They are quite right, of course. But even this is often disputed or ignored, so we cannot avoid some discussion. It is necessary to see Pound under two aspects: as he worked upon poetry and as he worked upon the public. The notion of him as publicist for Joyce, Eliot, Frost, a hundred others, being still current, I feel free to select instances displaying rather the first aspect, and take his relations with W. B. Yeats, with Imagism, and with *The Waste Land*—with the major poet, that is, the major movement, and the major poem, of the century so far.

Pound went to London in 1908, at twenty-three, to learn from Yeats how to write poetry, in the belief that no one then living knew more about it. Swinburne was just alive (when he died the following April, 'I am the King of the Cats,' said Yeats to one of his sisters meeting her in the street), inaccessible behind Watts-Dunton.

Swinburne my only miss
and I didn't know he'd been to see Landor
and *they told me this that an' tother*
and when old Mathews went he saw the three teacups
two for Watts Dunton who liked to let his tea cool
So old Elkin had only one glory
He did carry Algernon's suit once
when he, Elkin, first came to London.
But given what I know now I'd have
got thru it somehow . . . . Dirce's shade
or a black jack. (Canto LXXXII)

Pound was a most odd disciple; he regarded himself as the heir of Browning, he was stirring free of Fitzgerald and the Nineties, he had already begun the war on the iamb and the English heroic line that would never end (consider the two opening dactyls here and then the spondee-two-dactyls-and-trochee of the beautiful sixth line), he was full of the Troubadors, and he was becoming obsessed with the concept of verse-as-*speech*. He had as much energy as Yeats. The older poet has recorded his debt to the younger for advice against abstractions, underlinings of them, help in revision, and so on. But the change that began to move in Yeats' verse about this time was towards speech, the beginning of his famous development, and like one or two others

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I have always supposed Pound the motor. What seems to have happened was this. Pound was going in the afternoons to see Ford Madox Hueffer (Ford), and in the evenings to see Yeats; the older men did not get on. Of four 'honourable debts' he acknowledged later, the chief was Hueffer, who 'believes one should write in a contemporary spoken or at least speakable language'—not the same thing, it will be observed, as Pound's famous earlier formulation of 'Mr. Hueffer's realization that poetry should be written at least as well as prose.'

So old Ezra had only one glory

here, that he passed on without source in the evening what he had heard in the afternoon.

Then Imagism. There were two 'Imagist' movements (besides a dilution of the second, conducted by Amy Lowell, which reached the public), both in London. The first was started in March 1909 by T. E. Hulme who was insisting on 'absolutely accurate presentation and no verbiage,' F. S. Flint who had been advocating 'vers libre,' Edward Storer who was interested in 'the Image,' and others, all strongly under the influence of French Symbolist poetry. Pound joined the group on April 22nd—Elkin Mathews had published the week before a third collection of poems, *Personae,* his first book proper, which would establish him. Pound read out to the startled Soho cafe a new poem 'Sestina: Altaforte.' *Exultations,* issued later that year and *Canzoni* (1911), continuing his Provençal investigations, display no Imagist affiliation; *Ripostes* (1912) does, and at the end of it he printed Hulme's five poems and named the movement, which had passed away meanwhile, perhaps because none of its other members could write poetry. Through Pound personally the first movement reached the second. The second consisted of H. D. and Richard Aldington, who were inspired not by French but by Greek verse, in 1912; Pound got their work printed, wrote the movement's essential documents (in *Poetry* for March 1913, 'A Few Don'ts' and an interview with him signed by Flint), and edited *Des Imagistes* which appeared in March of 1914. By the time Miss Lowell arrived with her retinue that summer, Pound, joined now with Wyndham Lewis and the sculptor Gaudier-Brzeska, had launched Vorticism, in the opening *Blast.* The importance of literary movements is readily exaggerated; conceivably in the end Imagism will seem val-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

uable above all as it affected Pound's verse. Still, with a doubtful exception for the unnamed movement of the Auden group about 1930, it is the migration to a new position, for our time, that retains most interest, and is a fair sample of Pound's activity.

His now celebrated operation some years later upon *The Waste Land,* disengaging that work as we know it from what its author describes as a sprawling, chaotic poem twice as long, is another. Keeping our wits and facts in order, we need not follow a critic sometimes so penetrating as Yvor Winters in seeing Pound as the 'primal spirit' behind every gesture, every deplorable gesture, of the deplorable Mr. Eliot. 'The principal influence' upon Eliot's verse, Mr. Winters writes, 'is probably that of Laforgue, whose poetry Pound had begun to champion at least as early as 1917.' This is very early indeed, only seven years after Eliot's 'Humouresque, After J. Laforgue' in the *Harvard Advocate*. No, Eliot started alone. The two poets met first, and Pound persuaded *Poetry* to print 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,' in 1915, by which date Eliot was nearly through with Laforgue. Mr. Winters' remark neglects also the serial character of the influences on Eliot's poetry, which include Laforgue, Webster, James, Baudelaire, Pound, Gautier, Joyce, Apollinaire, Dante. It is emphatically not a mistake, however, to regard Pound's personal influence as great from 1915 on; and great on the period as a whole.

The reader who is not a student of poetry has another ground for indifference. Pound, he has always heard, has no *'matter.'* Granting the 'importance' of his verse, granting the possibility that having been for poets fertile it might prove on acquaintance agreeable or beautiful, what has he to do with this sport, a matterless poetry? This is a much more sophisticated dissatisfaction, and can claim the highest critical support. 'I confess,' Mr. Eliot once wrote, 'that I am seldom interested in what he is saying, but only in the way he says it'; and R. P. Blackmur, 'he is all surface and articulation.' We notice Mr. Eliot's qualification ('seldom') and we are puzzled by an ambiguity in Mr. Blackmur's 'articulation' (is this jointing or merely uttering?); but on the whole they put authoritatively the established view. Now there can be no question of traversing such authorities directly. But it is a violent and remarkable charge; I think we are bound to look into it a little.

If his critics are right, Pound himself misconceived his work

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

from the beginning and has continued to do so. This is of course not impossible; in fact I shall be arguing presently, in another sense, that it is just what he has done. But let us hear what he has said. In a very early poem, 'Revolt, Against the crepuscular spirit in modern poetry,' he says:

I would shake off the lethargy of this our time, and give
For shadows—shapes of power
For dreams—men.

If the poem is bad, the programme is distinct. Then one of his debts, he records later, 'may be considered as the example of or hint from Thomas Hardy, who, despite the aesthetic era, has remained interested in his subject, i.e. in distinction to being interested in "treatment." Among other passages to the same effect, I give one more, later still, which readers must have come on with surprise. Speaking of Mr. Eliot and Miss Moore, Pound remarks, 'Neither they nor anyone else is likely to claim that they have as much interest in life as I have, or that I have their patience in reading.'

The 'literary' or 'aesthetic' view taken of Pound now for many years will not be much disturbed by such assertions, until we observe how oddly they are confirmed by the opinions expressed in 1909 about *Personae*. These opinions are worth attention, because Pound's literary personality became known as a leader's thereafter, and most reviews his books have received, since, show the impress of this knowledge; they are impure. It is hardly too much to say that the first *Personae* was the last volume of Pound's that was widely judged on its merits. What did the old reviewers say? 'He writes out of an exuberance of incontinently struggling ideas and passionate convictions. . . . He plunges straight into the heart of his theme, and suggests virility in action combined with fierceness, eagerness, and tenderness'—so R. A. Scott-James, whose excitement, by the way, about 'the brute force of Mr. Pound's imagination' did not prevent his noticing the unusual spondee-dactyl use which he exemplified with a lovely line from 'Cino':

Eyes, dréams, / lips, and the / night góes.

It is absolutely unnecessary, and appears to a scholar probably very ridiculous, to patronize the reviewers of an earlier age. 'The beauty of ("In Praise of Ysolt") is the beauty of passion, sincerity and intensity wrote Edward Thomas, 'not of beautiful words and images

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and suggestions . . . . the thought dominates the words and is greater than they are.' One hardly recognizes here the 'superficial' or 'mindless' Pound whom critics have held up to us since. Faced with a welter of Provençal and Browning and early Yeats, not to mention Villon, the reviewers nevertheless insisted upon the poet's strong individuality: 'All his poems are like this, from beginning to end, and in every way, his own, and in a world of his own. Faced with this learning (the notes quote Richard of St. Victor, etc.), they admired 'his fearlessness and lack of self-consciousness,' the breath of the open air.' 'He cannot be usefully compared,' Thomas went on, 'with any living writers . . . full of personality and with such power to express it, that' and so on. The Oxford *Isis* agreed that 'physically and intellectually the verse seems to reproduce the personality with a brief fullness and adequacy.' Instead of pursuing the engaging themes thrown up by this medley of exaggeration and justice, culled mostly from the back leaves of *Exultations,* let me pass to a third, more serious difficulty with the view that Pound has no 'matter.'

Pound's poetry treats of Provençe, China, Rome, London, medieval living, modern living, human relationships, authors, young women, animals, money, games, government, war, poetry, love, and other things. This can be verified. What the critics must mean, then, is that they are aware of a *defect,* or defects, in the substance of the poetry. About one defect they have been explicit: the want of originality of substance. Pound has no matter *of his own.* Pound—who is even in the most surprising quarters conceded to be a 'great' translator—is best as a translator. 'The "Propertius" is a sturdier, more sustained, and more independent poem than "Mauberley," ' writes Mr. Blackmur. 'Craftsmanship may be equally found in both poems; but Mr. Pound has contributed more of his own individual sensibility, more genuine personal voice, in the "Propertius" where he had something to proceed from, than in "Mauberley" where he was on his own. . . . This fact, which perhaps cannot be demonstrated but which can be felt when the reader is familiar enough with the poems, is the key-fact of serious judgment upon Mr. Pound.' I do not feel sure that time is bearing out the first part of this careful judgment; the finest sections of Pound's postwar farewell to London, where the grotesquerie of Tristan Corbière is a new element in the complex style, naive and wily, in which he celebrates the modern poet's diffi-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

culties and nostalgia, seem to me somewhat more brilliant, solid, and independent, than the finest sections of the Roman poem. But my objections to the point of view begin well behind any value-judgment. *All* the ambitious poetry of the last six hundred years is much less 'original' than any but a few of its readers ever realize. A staggering quantity of it has direct sources, even verbal sources, in other poetry, history, philosophy, theology, prose of all kinds. Even the word 'original' in this sense we find first in Dryden, and the sense was not normalized till the mid-century following. A few hours, or days, with several annotated editions of *Lycidas* will transform the reader's view of this matter, especially if he will bear in mind the likelihood that the serious modern poet's strategy resembles Milton's—exceptional as Milton was—far more closely than his (the reader's) attitude and knowledge resemble Milton's contemporary reader's attitude and knowledge. Poetry is a palimpsest. 'The old playwrights took old subjects,' remarks a poet who has not been accused of want of originality, 'did not even arrange the subject in a new way. They were absorbed in expression, that is to say in what is most near and delicate.' So Yeats; but our literary criticism, if at its best it knows all this well enough, even at its best is inclined to forget it and to act as if originality were not regularly a matter of *degree* in works where it is worth assessing at all. A difficulty is that modern critics spend much of their time in the perusal of writing that really is more or less original, and negligible. This African originality is very confusing. One of the writer's favourite poems is perfect Thomson in manner as well as perfect Wordsworth, the substance is all but purely Wordsworth's, and how are we accustomed to deal with this? The answer is that we are not. It clearly troubles Mr. Eliot that the two first sections of 'Near Perigord' resemble Browning, Pound's master, though the poem seems to him (as to me) beautiful and profound; this poem is extremely original in substantial development. Now though Mr. Blackmur is preferring derivation and Mr. Eliot is deprecating it, they appear to illustrate an identical disorder of procedure, that of a criticism which is content to consider in isolation originality of either matter *or* manner, without regard to the other, and with small regard to degree. I term this a disorder rather than a defect because with regard to a poetry as singular as Pound's, and with such diverse claims upon our attention, it is all

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

but fatal to criticism. The critics were writing, one fifteen years ago, the other twenty, but I do not know that our situation has much improved, and it goes without saying that the best criticism of the period has addressed itself almost exclusively to manner, except for the proliferation in the last decade of an exegetical criticism similarly limited and comparatively abject. Until we get a criticism able to consider both originalities, in degree, Pound's achievement as a poet cannot be finally extricated from the body of his verse; and prepossessions should be avoided. That he has translated so much has no doubt cost him many readers, who (despite Dryden and Pope) cannot imagine that a 'real poet' would be content to translate so much; but criticism should be wiser.

Why *has* Pound translated so much? The question is an important one, and the answers usually given ignore the abyss of difference between his just-translations, like the Cavalcanti (the Canzone aside, of which his final version opens Canto XXXVI), such as might have been made by another poet of superlative skill, and renderings like those in *Cathay* and *Propertius,* which are part of Pound's own life-poetry. The first class may be considered as exercise, propaganda, critical activity, taken in conjunction with his incoherent and powerful literary criticism. The second class requires a word about Pound's notion of *personae* or masks, which issued successively in the masks of Cino, Bertran de Born, various Chinese poets, Propertius, Mauberley, fifty others. They differ both from Yeats's masks and from the dramatizations, such as Prufrock and Auden's 'airman,' that other poets find necessary in a period inimical to poetry, gregarious, and impatient of dignity.

We hear of the notion in two of his earliest poems, a sonnet 'Masks' about

> *souls that found themselves among*
> *Unwonted folk that spake a hostile tongue,*
> *Some souls from all the rest who'd not forgot*
> *The star-span acres of a former lot*
> *Where boundless mid the clouds his course he swung,*
> *Or carnate with his elder brothers sung*
> *E'er ballad makers lisped of Camelot . . . .*

and 'In Durance':

> *But for all that, I am homesick after mine own kind*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And would meet kindred even as I am,
Flesh-shrouded bearing the secret.

The question is, what the masks are *for*

Does any reader who is familiar with Pound's poetry really not see that its subject is life of the modern poet?

It is in *'Famam Librosque Cano'* and *'Scriptor Ignotus'* of *Personae*—

And I see my greater soul-self bending
Sibylwise with that great forty-year epic
That you know of, yet unwrit
But as some child's toy 'tween my fingers.
* * *
If my power be lesser
Shall my striving be less keen? . . . .

It is in 'Histrion' of *Exultations*—

'Tis as in midmost us there glows a sphere
Translucent, molten gold, that is the "I"
And into this some form projects itself
* * *
And these, the Masters of the Soul, live on.

It is in one of the few good lines of *Canzoni*—

Who calls me idle? I have thought of her.

It is in 'N.Y.' of *Rispostes* (1912), the volume in which Pound established his manner and the volume with which modern poetry in English may be felt to have begun—

My City, my beloved, my white! Ah, slender,
* * *
Delicately upon the reed, attend me!

Now do I know that I am mad,
For here are a million people surly with traffic:
This is no maid.
Neither could I play upon any reed if I had one.

It is everywhere (as well as in the Chinese work) in the more 'original' poems and epigrams of *Lustra*, written 1913-1916. (A lustrum is 'an offering for the sins of the whole people, made by the censors at the expiration of their five years of office.' It has not perhaps been sufficiently observed that Pound is one of the wittiest poets who ever wrote. Yet he is serious enough in this title. In certain attitudes—

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

his medieval nostalgia, literary anti-semitism, others—he a good deal resembles Henry Adams; each spent his life, as it were, seeking an official post where he could be used, and their failure to find one produced both the freedom and the inconsequence that charm and annoy us in these authors.) It is in the elaborate foreign personae that followed, *Cathay* (1915)—

And I have moped in the Emperor's garden, awaiting
an order-to-write!

and *Propertius* (1917)—

I who come first from the clear font
Bringing the Grecian orgies into Italy
and the dance into Italy.

It is in *Mauberly,* of course—

Dowson found harlots cheaper than hotels;
So spoke the author of "The Dorian Mood,"

M. Verog, out of step with the decade,
Detached from his contemporaries,
Neglected by the young,
Because of these reveries.

Meanwhile Pound's concept of method had been strongly affected by Ernest Fenollosa's essay on *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* ('Metaphor, the revealer of nature, is the very substance of poetry . . . . Chinese poetry gets back near to the processes of nature by means of its vivid figure. . . . If we attempt to follow it in English we must use words highly charged, words whose vital suggestion shall interplay as nature interplays. Sentences must be like the mingling of the fringes of feathered banners, or as the colors of many flowers blended into the single sheen of a meadow . . . . a thousand tints of verb') and for years he had been trying to work out a form whereby he could get his subject all together; by the time of *Mauberley* he had succeeded, in the final version of the opening *Cantos.* And it is, as we shall see, in the *Cantos* also.

Above all, certain themes in the life of the modern poet: indecision-decision and infidelity-fidelity. Pound has written much more love-poetry than is generally realized, and when fidelity and decision lock in his imagination we hear extraordinary effects, passionate, solemn. A lady is served her singer-lover's hearts, eats, and her husband tells her whose:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"It is Cabestan's heart in the dish."
"It is Cabestan's heart in the dish?
"No other taste shall change this." (Canto IV)

She hurtles from the window.

And in south province Tchin Tiaouen had risen
and took the city of Tchang tcheou
offered marriage to Ouang Chi,
who said: It is an honour.
I must first bury Kanouen. His body is heavy.
His ashes were light to carry
Bright was the flame for Kanouen
Ouang Chi cast herself into it, Faithful forever
High the hall TIMOUR made her. (Canto LVI)

'His body is heavy.' The theme produces also the dazzle and terror of the end of 'Near Perigord,' where we finally reach Bertran *through Maent,* whom we'd despaired of. If there are a passion and solemnity beyond this in poetry—

Soul awful! if the earth has ever lodg'd
An awful soul—

we have to go far to find them. If Pound is neither the poet apostrophized here nor the poet apostrophizing, not Milton or Wordsworth, his place will be high enough. These themes of decision and fidelity bear on much besides love in his poetry, and even—as one would expect with a subject of the poet-in-exile (Ovid, Dante, Villon, Browning, Henry James, Joyce, Pound, Eliot, as Mann, Brecht, Auden) whose allegiance is to an ideal state—upon politics:

homage, fealty are to the person
can not be to body politic . . . . (Canto LXVII)*

Of course there are other themes, strong and weak, and a multiplicity of topics, analogies to the life of the modern poet, with or without metaphor the *interests* of the poet. But this would appear to charac-

* Without allusion to the poet's personal situation, which is rather a matter for courts, which have reached no verdict, and psychiatrists, who have declared the poet insane, than for literary criticism, it will be recalled as a gloss for these lines that when the Irish patriot Sir Roger Casement was tried for treason a war ago he had to be tried under a statute centuries old, the charge being based upon a conventional oath of *personal* loyalty to the King made when Casement was knighted for services 'to the Crown' as a civil servant investigating atrocities in the Putomayo.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

terize any poet's work. I mean more definitely 'Life and Contacts,' as the sub-title of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* has it.

It is not quite Ezra Pound himself. Yeats, another Romantic, was also the subject of his own poetry, himself-as-himself. Pound is his own subject *qua* modern poet; it is the experience and fate of this writer 'born / In a half savage country, out of date,' a voluntary exile for over thirty years, that concern him. Another distinction is necessary. Wallace Stevens has presented us in recent years with a series of strange prose documents about 'imagination' and 'reality.' If Mr. Stevens' poetry has for substance imagination, in this dichotomy, Pound's has for substance reality. A poem like 'Villanelle: the Psychological Hour' or the passage I have quoted about Swinburne could have been made only by Pound, and the habit of mind involved has given us much truth that we could not otherwise have had. Two young friends did not come to see the poet! The poet missed a master! This is really in part what life consists of, though reading most poetry one would never guess it.

And we say good-bye to you also,
For you seem never to have discovered
That your relationship is wholly parasitic;
Yet to our feasts you bring neither
Wit, nor good spirits, nor the pleasing attitudes
Of discipleship.

It is personal, but it is not very personal. The 'distance' everywhere felt in the finest verse that treats his subject directly has I think two powerful sources, apart from the usual ones (versification and so on). First, there is the peculiar detachment of interest with which Pound seems to regard himself; no writer could be less revelatory of his passional life, and his friends have recorded—Dr. Williams with annoyance—the same life-long reticence in private. Second, his unfaltering, encyclopedic mastery of tone—a mastery that compensates for a comparative weakness of syntax. (By instinct, I parenthesize, Pound has always minimized the importance of syntax, and this instinct perhaps accounts for his inveterate dislike for Milton, a dislike that has had broad consequences for three decades of the twentieth century; not only did Milton seem to him, perhaps, anti-romantic *and* anti-realistic, undetailed, and anti-conversational, but Milton is the supreme English master of syntax.) Behind this mastery

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lies his ear. I scarcely know what to say of Pound's ear. Fifteen years of listening have not taught me that it is inferior to the ear of the author of *Twelfth Night*. The reader who heard the damage done, in my variation, to Pound's line—*So old Elkin had only one glory*—will be able to form his own opinion.

We write verse—was it Renoir, 'I paint with my penis'—we write verse with our ears; so this is important. Forming, animating, quelling his material, that ear is one of the main, weird facts of modern verse. It imposes upon the piteous stuff of the *Pisan Cantos* a 'distance' as absolute as upon the dismissal of the epigram just cited. The poet has listened to his life, so to speak, and he tells us that which he hears.

Both the personality-as-subject and the expressive personality are nearly uniform, I think, once they developed. In Yeats, in Eliot, we attend to re-formations of personality. Not really in Pound; he is unregenerate. *'Toutes mes pièces datent de quinze ans,'* he quoted once with approval from a friend, and the contrast he draws between the life of the poet as it ought to be (or has been) and as it is, this contrast is perennial. But if this account of the poet's subject is correct, what can have concealed it from most even sympathetic and perceptive critics and readers? With regard to critics, two things, I believe. All the best critics of Pound's work themselves write verse, most of them verse indebted to Pound's, much of it heavily; they have been interested in craft, not personality and subject. Also they have been blinded, perhaps, by the notion of the 'impersonality' of the poet. This perverse and valuable doctrine, associated in our time with Mr. Eliot's name, was toyed with by Goethe and gets expression in Keats's insistence that the poet 'has no identity—he is continually in, for, and filling some other body.' For poetry of a certain mode (the dramatic) this is a piercing notion; for most other poetry, including Pound's, it is somewhat paradoxical, and may disfigure more than it enlightens. It hides motive, which persists. It fails to enable us to see, for instance, that the dominant source of inspiration in Keats's sonnet on Chapman's Homer is *antagonism,* his contempt for Pope and Pope's Homer. (This view, which I offer with due hesitation, is a development from an industrious and thoughtful biography of the sonnet by a British scholar in *Essays and Studies* for 1931.)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The reader is in one way more nearly right than the majority of critics. He is baffled by a heterogeneity of matter, as to which I shall have more to say in a moment, but he hears a personality in Pound's poetry. In fact, his hostility—we reach it at last—is based upon this. The trouble is that he hears the personality he expected to hear, rather than the one that is essentially there. He hears Pound's well-known prose personality, bellicose, programmatic, positive, and he resents it. Mr. Pound is partly responsible. This personality does exist in him, it is what he has lived with, and he can even write poetry with it, as we see in 'Sestina: Altaforte' and elsewhere early and late. A follower of Browning, he takes a keenly *active* view of poetry, and has, conceivably, a most imperfect idea both of just what his subject is and of what his expressive personality is like.

This personality is feline, supra-delicate, absorbed. If Browning made the fastest verse in English, Pound makes the slowest, the most discrete and suave. He once said of a story in *Dubliners* that it was something better than a story, it was 'a vivid waiting,' and the phrase yields much of his own quality. There is restlessness; but the art of the poet places itself, above all, immediately and mysteriously at the service of the passive and elegiac, the nostalgic. The true ascendancy of this personality over the other is suggested by a singular fact: the degree in which the mantic character is absent from his poetry. He looks ahead indeed, looks ahead eagerly, but he does not *feel* ahead; he feels back. (Since writing the sentence, I come on the phrase in Fenollosa, an impressive remark, 'The chief work of literary men in dealing with language, and of poets especially, lies in feeling back along the ancient lines of advance.') It is the poetry of a late craftsman; of an expatriate—

> *Moaneth alway my mind's lust*
> *That I fare forth, that I afar hence*
> *Seek out a foreign fastness.* ('The Seafarer')

> *Here we are, picking the first fern-shoots*
> *And saying: When shall we get back to our country?*
> * * *
> *Our sorrow is bitter, but we would not return to our country.* (*Cathay's first lines*)

—of a failing culture. The personality is full already in 'The Return' from *Ripostes,*—return of the hunters, or literary men, for like others

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of Pound's poems this is a metaphor: those who in an earlier poem had cried

'Tis the white stag, Fame, we're ahunting,'

now come back illusionless.

The *Cantos* seem to be a metaphor also. This immense poem, as yet untitled and unfinished, is seriously unfinished: two cantos are missing, and sixteen are to come, if the poet recovers sufficiently to be able to write verse again. Since Canto LXXIV alone is twenty-five pages long, it is clear that the last sixteen of the hundred may alter radically views we have formed of the work as a whole from the part we know; and we want to avoid the error (if it was one) of Mr. Pound when he hazarded in 1933, of the still untitled and unfinished *Finnegans Wake,* 'It can hardly be claimed . . . . that the main design emerges above the detail.' Nevertheless I must say something of the subject and form of this epic. I believe the critical view is that it is a 'rag-bag' of the poet's interests, 'A catalogue, his jewels of conversation.' It can be read with delight and endless profit thus, if at any rate one understands that it is a work of versification, that is, a poem. The basal rhythm I hear is dactylic, as in the Swinburne and Ouang Chi passages and in the opening line 'And then went dówn to the ship,'—in this line we see the familiar tendency of English dactyls to resolve themselves into anapests with anacrusis, but the ambiguity seems to me to be progressively avoided as the poem advances. But the rag-bag view depends for support upon lines that Pound cut out of the primitive printed versions of the earliest cantos; the form greatly developed, the form *for the subject.* For a rag-bag the poem sets out very oddly. I will describe the first three Cantos.

I. The Poet's, the Hero's, physical and mental travel: what can 'I' expect? Persona, Odysseus-in-exile; antagonist, Poseidon (the 'godly sea'—an ironic pun). Material: escape-from-transformation, sacrifice, descent to Hell, recognition of and obligation to the Dead (parents, masters), prediction of return *alone* over the seas, 'Lose all companions.' (This is exactly, thirty years later, what happened to the poet.) Form: a depth-introduction, heroic Greek (*Odyssey* xi) through Renaissance Latin (Divus) in old-heroic-English-style as modified by modern style. So the first Canto, about sacrifice to the enemy, acknowledgment of indebtedness, and outset.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

II. The orchestra begins, the poet's nineteenth-century English master to Provençal to Chinese to ancient British to modern Spanish (another exile) to ancient Greek, very rapidly; then the Poet's theme and temptation, Beauty, a faithless woman (Helen); then an exquisite, involved color- and sense-lyric (the first of dozens) in honor of Poseidon's beloved; then the canto proper, about *betrayal,* the metamorphoses into 'Sniff and pad-foot of beasts' of all those who do not recognize and wish to *sell* (sell out) the God—Dionysus and Poseidon are linked as having power each over the sea, and those false to them are the 'betrayers of language' of Canto XIV, Mr. Nixon of *Mauberley*—'I' (Acoethes, the persona) alone have not. Exilic Ovid is the fable's source.

III. Three themes: (1) A stronger sea-ceremony than sacrifice, *embracing* of difficulties, the Venetian *'sponzalizio del mar'* ('to wed the sea as a wife,' Canto XXVI), *'voce tinnula'* below being Catullus' 'with ringing voice' for nuptial songs; (2) enmities and poverty that beset the Poet or Hero (persona, the Cid), *proscription*; (3) artistic mortality, a Mantegna fresco flaking, and just before, an opposite example, Ignez da Castro stabbed by her lover's order (Pedro I of Portugal) in 1355, then avenged by her son, exhumed and *crowned* ('here made to stand')—

Time is the evil. Evil.
A day, and a day
Walked the young Pedro baffled,
a day, and a day
After Ignez was murdered.
Came the Lords in Lisboa
a day, and a day
In homage. Seated there
dead eyes,
Dead hair under the crown,
The King still young there beside her. (Canto XXX)

This kind of interpenetration of life and art, in metaphor, is one of the poem's triumphs, a Coleridgean 'fusing.'

Such, according to the notes I once made in my margin, is the beginning of this famous 'formless' work which is, according to one critic of distinction, 'not about anything.' Reviewers of the *Pisan Cantos* have showed surprise that they were so 'personal,' and yet very

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fine,—it is the most brilliant sequence indeed since the original thirty. The *Cantos* have always been personal; only the persona increasingly adopted, as the Poet's fate clarifies, is Pound himself. The heterogeneity of material every reader remarks seems to have three causes. The illusion of Pound's romanticism ('—if romanticism indeed be an illusion!' he exclaims in *Indiscretions*) has given him an inordinate passion for ages and places where the Poet's situation appears attractive, as in the Malatesta cantos, where Sigismondo is patron as much as ruler and lover (VIII-XI), and the Chinese cantos (XIII, XLIX, LII-LXI); here he is sometimes wonderful but sometimes ungovernable. Then he is anxious to find out *what has gone wrong,* with money and government, that has produced our situation for the Poet; several of the money-cantos, XLV and LI, are brilliant, but most of the American historical cantos (XXXI-IV, XXXVII-VIII, LXII-LXXI) are willed, numb, angry—the personae Jefferson and John Adams are not felt and so the material is uncontrolled. The rest of his heterogeneity is due to an immoderate desire, strong in some other modern artists also, for mere conservation—

And lest it pass with the day's news
Thrown out with the daily paper. (Canto XXVIII)

Once the form, and these qualifications, are understood, Pound's work presents less difficulty than we are used to in ambitious modern poetry. Pieces like 'A Song for the Degrees' (an anti-Psalm) and 'Papyrus' (a joke, for that matter a clear and good one) are rare. Occasionally you have to look things up if you don't wish to be puzzled; and it does no harm to use the index volume of Britannica Eleventh, and various dictionaries, and to be familiar with Pound's prose, when you read the *Cantos;* the labor is similar to that necessary for a serious understanding of *Ulysses,* and meditation is the core of it. To find out what a modern poet has done we have often to ask *why* he did it.

The poet's own statements must be accepted with a certain reserve, which neither his admirers nor his detractors have always exercised. Thus the *Cantos* are said to be written in an equivalent for ideogram. We have recognized their relation to parts of Fenollosa. But Fenollosa's technical center is an attack on the copula; I observe that four of the lines about Ouang Chi successively employ the copula without loss to characteristic beauty, and I reason that we

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

must inquire into these things for ourselves. More interesting, far, are the equivalents for musical form, and the versification. So with Pound's remark that the *Cantos* are 'the tale of the tribe'; they seem to be only apparently an historical or philosophical epic, actually a personal epic—as he seems to understand himself elsewhere in *Culture* when he suggests that the work may show, like Beethoven's music, the 'defects inherent in a record of struggle.' Mr. Pound too may really, like his critics, regard the work as nearly plotless and heroless. Writing of Dr. Williams he says, 'I would almost move . . . . to the generalization that plot, major form, or outline should be left to authors who feel some inner need for the same; even let us say a very strong, unusual, unescapable need for these things; and to books where the said form, plot, etc., springs naturally from the matter treated.' 'Almost,' and he is not speaking of the *Cantos* directly, but the passage is a very striking and heretical one. I put in evidence against it his long labors on the opening Cantos, and the Cantos themselves in my simple analysis, where the arraying of themes is quite different from casualty. The Hell-allusions in the first half of the work, with the allusions to Heaven in recent Cantos, also strongly imply a major form. But all present discussion must be tentative. I have the impression that Pound allowed, in whatever his plan exactly was (if it exactly was, and if it was one plan), for the drift-of-life, the interference of fate, inevitable in a period of violent change; that this may give us something wholly unpredictable in the Cantos to come, as it has given us already the marvellous pages of the *Pisan Cantos*. Here we feel the poet as he felt D'Annunzio in 1922: D'Annunzio, he wrote from Paris to *The Dial,* 'lies with a bandaged eye in a bombarded Venice, foaming with his own sensations, memories, speculations as to what Dante might or might not have done had he been acquainted with Aeschylus.' Foaming, yet always with the limpidity, *clarté*, the love against rhetoric, for which his poetry is our model in this century. It would be interesting, if the *Cantos* were complete, to compare the work with another poem, not more original in conception, exhibiting, if a smaller range of material and technical variety, greater steadiness, a similar substance and a similar comprehensive mastery of expression, *The Prelude*; but the argument of my very limited essay is ended. Let us listen to this music.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LETTERS FROM PARIS

I

IMPRESSIONS AND CONVERSATIONS

In this city the book shops are displaying all sorts of elegantly printed and intriguing works. There is the just published collection of the writings of Felix Fénéon, that extraordinary critic from way back in the nineteenth century, who was one of the first to recognize Rimbaud and Seurat; there is the handsomely gotten up play of the young poet Henri Pichette, "Les Epiphanies," which had such success last year; there are recent books by Queneau, Michaux and Sartre. No, it cannot be said that Paris is intellectually dull or uneventful. It seems that everything here is immediately published, foreign works are quickly translated and the publishers do not have to count the cost. I am thinking of how different the situation is in New York where the publishers, big and small, are so doleful about the chances of any book not a novel, and so proud to point to one or two books on their lists which they got out without having to be convinced in advance they would make a pile.

It is often said in New York: Well, all this talk of intellectual life in France is bunk. What have the French produced after all, that is, in recent years? The best things they have done have been translated, and are not so hot. And we can point to new things by Faulkner, Wallace, Stevens, Cummings, etc. Here I think, my friends in America miss the point, and quite characteristically. What makes for a living intellectual milieu is not the continual production of masterpieces (I think the very notion of a masterpiece does not exist anymore for the French writers), but the readiness to give expression to a persistent intellectual curiosity. One has the impression that it is impossible to say anything new in Paris without being heard and replied to. For example: Sartre's brilliant *Qu'est-ce que la Littérature?* has already elicited a counter-theory of art, quite as ably sustained, if with less verve and energy, by Emanuel Levinas, who, in an article in the latest issue of *Les Temps Modernes,* argues that art is inevitably *dégagé,* rather than *engagé,* that it is not a "knowing" but a "not-knowing," and that its peculiar function is to miss understanding, which is not the same thing as to misunderstand. Surely there is no lack of ideas in Paris. But what is just as im-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

portant is the contact between the different generations, something which does not exist at all in America. And this contact generates a sense of time and history without which ideas tend to become unreal, or to be "worth while" to us only to the extent that they seem likely to "last," and be valued later on when we are not around. The other night at Jean Wahl's *Collège de Philosophie* where classes are held regularly, I heard Wahl give a very clear exposition of Merleau-Ponty's *"Phénomenologie de la Perception."* Can one conceive of an American professor, his academic position secure, taking the trouble to explore the ideas of a young philosopher, and what is more, of a young philosopher with talent, like Merleau-Ponty?

Nowhere else in the world is literature believed in so much and so little as here in Paris. And I mean by the same people. Faith in what can be achieved by writing has reached that point of extreme sophistication that occurs in religious movements when they develop an antinomian character. It has been said that only the atheist believes in God. In Paris, it is the atheists of literature who produce the interesting books and reap the literary honors. The young poet, Henri Pichette, entitled his very first book *"Apoèmes"* and described himself as an *"Apoète."* And it is clear that Sartre who writes all the time—he told me that the third volume of his novel was already completed, a fourth was under way, that he was beginning a new play and had already taken seven hundred pages of notes for a projected book on ethics—it is clear that this prodigious writer does not think that writing is what matters most. It goes without saying that the tension of so sophisticated an attitude towards literature cannot but lead to a certain hypocrisy—particularly in the young. But once one has tasted the dialectics of a love for literature that includes disrepect for it, the old pietistic and aesthetic attitudes come to seem insipid.

Only when politics comes up do these completely conscious men, with whom it is so pleasurable to talk, lapse into evasive paradoxes. Jean Wahl told me (I think he was serious) that if Russia succeeds in producing an atom bomb there may be no war. (About the atom bomb, by the way: it is clear that the Russians have succeeded in making better propaganda of their not having the bomb than the U.S. of its monopoly.) And Georges Bataille, who edits the excellent review *Crtique,* and has a real flair for subtlety, blandly insisted in the course of a discussion with me, that a world government is quite feasible, and would have ample police power at its disposal: the Red army plus the atom bomb! Then there was the comedy of the Gary Davis affair. This young man, as everybody knows, conceived the idea of turning in his passport and renounc-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing his American citizenship, laying claim to the title of first world citizen. A committee of French intellectuals was formed to defend him, and a meeting was held at the Pleyel Hall to support him and to demand some action leading to world government. The *Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire* of Sartre and Rousset lent this action the kind of ambiguous aid which Marxist groups like to call "critical support"; but Camus, Breton and Bourdet, came out flat-footedly for the action of Gary Davis as something presaging a new kind of intervention in politics by the individual. I read what they wrote of Gary Davis and said at the meeting, with much astonishment, for these are surely well informed and clever men, and how could they think the course of history would be influenced in any essential respect by this Orson gee Wellsian gesture of a politically naive young man? On the other hand, neither Camus nor Breton wanted Davis' gesture to be generalized into a mass surrender of citizenship, for when the young and impressionable poet Pichette, who had heard the speeches at the Pleyel Meeting, sent his own passport, French papers, and *carte d'identité* to *Combat* (there is as yet no Bureau in the French Government authorized to accept resignations from French citizenship), Camus, Bourdet and Breton urged him to take back his papers, arguing that such behavior would be likely to harm the symbolic value of Gary Davis's act; and readers of *Combat* were informed by Robert Sarrazac (a member of the committee formed to support Davis) that it is not desirable to give up one's citizenship, and that each individual ought to demand to be made a citizen of the world *as well as* of his own particular country. No more passports! But for the present, instead of just one passport, let's each have two.

Camus' political writings, from what I have seen, have become wordy, soft and vaguely noble. After the Liberation he raised the inspiring slogan: Neither victims nor executioners! But if he was able to tell us how not to become executioners, he never succeeded in making it clear how we could avoid being victims. Of late he has taken to identifying the morally desirable and the politically effective. But to do this is to deny that a political problem exists. I think it was Kierkegaard who said that it takes no intellectual effort to discover what is morally right, and this is a good thing because we can't afford to waste any time *discovering the right*, since our only chance of achieving it is to start trying without delay. But in politics we do not know at once what is the best course to follow; here there is always an intellectual problem. Moreover the first sign of seriousness in politics is to be in favor of *some* bad things. Camus will only raise his voice for what is clearly

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

good. He has written a great deal of the "dialogue," which he says must be restored to public life. Nicola Chiaromonte has echoed the same idea in *Politics*. "If revolutions can only succeed by violence," said Camus at the Pleyel Meeting, "they can only be maintained by the dialogue." Now it is not the "dialogue" which revolutions threaten, but political activity. The "dialogue" has never been a part of public life. In the recent American elections the vote-grabbing of Truman, Dewey and Wallace is surely nearer to what we want in politics (aside from the rhetoric) than the dictates of the Politbureau to the Soviet people transmitted without discussion by Molotov or Stalin. But the appeals for votes of Truman, Dewey and Wallace are just as far from the "dialogue" as are the commands of the Soviet bosses. For the "dialogue" presupposes a situation in which one does not have to persuade. We want to aggrandize the role of persuasion and to diminish the role of force in public life. But the superiority of the former to the latter is a technical rather than a moral superiority. Persuasion is better than force just as literacy is better than analphabetism. The "dialogue" is an absolute value, but this simply means that it can never be the objective of political action.

The *Rassemblement* of Rousset and Sartre continues to take the line that the conflict between the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. is politically sterile, and that Europe should not ally itself with either of the two great powers, but should unify itself on a socialist basis and constitute a *third* camp. So the famous notion of a third alternative comes up again. The idea is not a new one, but perhaps we can be clearer now, having had it urged upon us several times in recent years, as to what it implies. When Trotsky organized his new International he meant it to serve as a third alternative to capitalism and Stalinism; but this did not prevent him from taking sides in the struggle then going on between the U.S.S.R. and capitalism; in fact he said that in the event of war he would unconditionally support the Soviet Union. Some of his followers thought this illogical and said: If we are on the side of camp number two, then how can we think of ourselves as camp number three? Trotsky's view was, however, that without supporting the U.S.S.R. against capitalism, his movement could never succeed in replacing Stalinism. Whether he was right or wrong in his attitude toward the Soviet Union I shall not discuss here; I have brought up this now stale argument only to show that the problem of introducing a third alternative into a given situation is more complex than may at first appear. In a certain sense there never really is a third alternative. For there are always only two effective wills in a situation of conflict. The third camp position is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

justified only when those who propose it aspire to supplant either or both of the two for the moment more powerful parties, and think it quite possible to do so. But to elect to be permanently third is to be resigned to be politically nil. Now, when Sartre and Rousset declare that they want Europe to form a third camp, do they mean that if unified on a socialist basis, it will be able to effect significant changes in the Russian or American systems, or do they, like Camus and Chiaromonte, mean that Europe is to be a third camp in the sense that permanently less powerful than Russia and America, unable to influence or destroy either American capitalism or Russian Stalinism, it will at least be strong enough to wrest a certain degree of tolerance from the two giants? I am not sure that this is not Sartre's view, too, for he told me that while Europe cannot prevent a new world war, if unified, it can at least see to it that it is not itself the cause of such a war. And this sounds as if his conception of Europe's possibilities were a fairly modest one.

But I must ask my friends in New York not to interpret everything that Sartre and Rousset write too literally, for before judging they should see these statements in the context of the present situation in France. It is ridiculous to interpret as "concessions to Stalinism" phrases of theirs that do not quite satisfy the requirements of New York political highmindedness. First of all, these men are conducting the only organized intellectual struggle against Stalinism in France. And in the second place, they are doing this without adopting the perspectives of social democracy, which most of the anti-communist intellectuals in New York have embraced without a blush. Moreover, in Europe, capitalism has no prestige whatever, and Russia has the prestige of not being capitalist. The Russian propaganda machine works night and day; of American propaganda there is little visible trace. Not a single newspaper gives expression to the American point of view. Sympathy for Russia, which is strong in the middle class as well as among the workers, and has even penetrated Catholic circles, is not based on ignorance of what is going on in Russia. People know about the forced labor, the police repression, etc. They think that these evils may be transitory. But if they have little enthusiasm for communism, they have absolutely no hope in capitalism.

I should say that the mood of the French intellectuals is gayer, less elegiac, more enterprising than that of their opposite members in New York. They seem to have discovered a way to make energy independent of illusion.

Lionel Abel

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

II

THE CRISIS OF THE FOURTH REPUBLIC

An analysis of the economic situation in France reveals two grave contradictions: one, between the needs of the nation and the desires of the population; the other, between city and country, workers and peasants.

After the liberation the foremost desire of the French people was to get back their prewar standard of living as quickly as possible, and after so many years of privation, this is perfectly understandable. Living conditions actually did begin to improve rapidly even in 1945, but not rapidly enough to satisfy the impatience of the public. Nominal wage increases at the rate of one or two a year, did not go far toward allaying this impatience; they created an illusory prosperity, characterized by banknotes rather than purchasing power.

At the same time the national welfare absolutely demanded an effort at savings and investments, for France must recover both from the devastations of the war and the industrial lag between the two wars. In 1938, production levels were twenty to twenty-five percent lower than in 1929, and somewhat lower even than in 1913. The forty hour week had been introduced; that is, the French worker had been granted the same amount of leisure as the American worker, although in France the productivity of labor is three to four times less than in the U.S. In the years immediately preceding the war, France lived on its capital reserves and foreign assets. Invisible exports no longer sufficed to compensate for the unfavorable trade balance. It became necessary to liquidate billions in French gold reserves and foreign assets for current payments.

It goes without saying that the war aggravated this situation. Nearly half a million dwellings were totally destroyed, a million and a half were damaged; the major part of French foreign investments were liquidated during the war or since the end of hostilities; railroads, canals, harbors, merchant marine all require repairs and in part complete rebuilding. Consequently, a higher percentage of French production than before the war had to be directed toward the maintenance, reconstruction or expansion of productive plant, transportation and housing. The government did not fail to recognize so obvious a necessity. A group of experts under the leadership of Jean Monnet drew up a plan for the industrial expansion that was held to be imperative for the six so-called basic sectors (coal, electricity, liquid fuels, transportation, ferrous metals, farm

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

machinery). The plan called for an increase of coal production to roughlv sixty million tons, and steel production to twelve million, and demanded considerable capital investment.

Unfortunately, Jean Monnet's experts were better engineers than economists. It was by no means certain that, from the economic point of view, the plan provided for the best possible use of available resources. In any case it should have dealt exhaustively with methods of financing, and on this point, it was inadequate and inconclusive. As for the successive governments, they did not have the courage to proclaim the simple truth that it was not possible to produce less than before the war, but to consume and invest more. The logical consequence of this contradiction was inflation.

The inspiration of the Monnet Plan was fundamentally sound. Perhaps its most dangerous flaw was that it stressed industrial production at the expense of agriculture. And the stabilization of the French economy depended first and foremost on agricultural production. The French people attach more importance to their table than to any other aspect of their living standard. It was of prime importance to provide them with something approximating their prewar diet.

Every possible blunder was committed. Industrial production was pressed before farm production; the governments were unable to choose between free distribution through the market and administrative distribution through rationing and authoritarian price-fixing; they combined the two methods. Their only answer to public protests consisted in nominal wage raises which could only make matters worse. It must be admitted that the task was overwhelming: already saddled with the costs of two preceding wars, the French economy had to devote enormous sums (roughly thirty percent of the ordinary budget) to military expenditures. It has been pointed out that in France taxes amount to no more than twenty to twenty-five percent of the ntaional income, while in England they amount to thirty-five percent and were even higher in the United States during the war. Without denying the inadequacy of the tax return and the defects of our fiscal system, we must bear in mind that these percentages are significant only in relation to the wealth of the country in question. The rate of tax tolerance increases with income, and this is true of nations as well as individuals. Another obstacle to successful tax collections in France is the dispersion of farm and business income among a relatively large number of units.

None of the mistakes that have been made is inexplicable, none is without a certain justification. The average Frenchman wished to consume, the engineer wished to reconstruct. The worker wanted normal

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

meat and butter rations. The peasant was unwilling to sell his produce except at black market prices. The State required one third of the national income and collected only somewhere between one fifth and one quarter. All of these contradictions are human, none is fatal in itself. But all of them taken together represent a crisis of the system.

What distinguishes the French crisis from that of the other Western democracies? The fundamental problem is the same: the British also wanted to do everything at once, to raise the standard of living of the masses and undertake a vast program of construction and tooling. There too the consequence of these excessive or conflicting efforts was inflation, i.e., an excess of public income over consumer goods; too much money in quest of too little merchandise. There too price distortions ensued, abrupt increases in the prices of uncontrolled and unrationed goods, resulting in a rush of capital to the privileged sectors which were not necessarily the most useful to the nation. But British methods limited the ravages of inflation, by distributing a basic food ration at constant prices. Likewise in Holland, the administrative distribution of a basic food ration assured the stability of the system.

I do not maintain that the economic policy of Great Britain or Holland is perfect, and it is not certain that such a policy will suffice to avoid a readjustment crisis at some future date. One may question the advisability of pegging the pound sterling at parity; one may say that the price level in Holland and even in England is artificial and can be maintained only by a constant tightening of controls; one may judge that the amount of currency in circulation is so far out of proportion to price levels that the shift from a controlled to a free economy will necessitate sharp price increases. And one may in part attribute the dearth of dollars to the artifices of economic control.

We have no intention of entering into these controversies. All governments are capable of making mistakes and we cannot demand of political leaders an infallibility which no one else would even think of imputing to their experts, who like every one else are a prey to conflicting opinions. In Great Britain and Holland, however, there has been a policy; in France there has been none, and that constitutes quite a difference. In those countries the main emphasis was laid on a stable price system, and suitable means of achieving it were adopted. But in France we are suffering the consequences of an absence of policy. No French government has ever decided either for an administrative distribution of basic products, or for free distribution. Certain products have been controlled (though an enormous margin of evasion has been

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tolerated), others have been decontrolled, and no attempt has been made to fit these contradictory decisions into a coherent overall plan. Thus it is no mere setback that we deplore, for even the best policy is likely to incur setbacks, but a lack of policy characteristic of a bankrupt system.

All the countries of Western Europe have been obliged, in one way or another, to accept a regime of austerity, for the period of reconstruction must inevitably be accompanied by privations or at least restrictions on consumption. In Great Britain, austerity is enforced by rationing, by the priority given to experts, by the reduction of all but indispensable imports. In Belgium there is no official mention of austerity, and every sort of merchandise is visible in the shop windows, but the stabilization of salaries limits the masses' share of all this abundance. France has attempted to combine these two methods of austerity. Luxury in the midst of shortages recalls the free market conditions prevailing in Belgium, the maintenance of rationing and subsidies recalls the British model, the wage raises reduce both methods to absurdity. Here again, we observe only a contradictory compromise equivalent to an absence of policy.

The reason for this impotence is both economic and political. In England there is no conflict between peasant and worker, between city and country. Seven percent of the working population live by farming. Sixty percent of foodstuffs are imported. The farmers receive high prices for their produce, and on the basis of subsidies farm products are sold at low prices in the cities. Nothing of the sort occurs in France. No rise in prices is granted the peasant without increasing the worker's cost of living. Worker and peasant react in very different ways, the worker collectively, the peasant individually. The worker can put political pressure on the government through unions; the peasant can exert an economic pressure even when he is not organized, by withholding the products for which everyone is clamoring in a period of shortage. These opposite pressures have produced simple and generally foreseen results. Through their unions the workers have obtained wage raises. The price of farm products has increased proportionally (or more than proportionally): producers and middle men have accumulated an excess of purchasing power.

Great Britain is governed by a one party government, but the Belgian and Dutch regimes are coalition governments. What then is the source of the weakness and incompetence of the French coalition governments? Why is a system which, whatever its intrinsic merits, has proved workable elsewhere, not viable in France?

One is tempted to evoke the importance of the Communist party

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

in France. In no other Western European country does the Communist Party number so many voters; in no other country does it wield so much power in the labor unions. Is this then the decisive factor? I have no wish to underestimate it, to suggest that it is easy to make a private economy function when the labor unions are united in a central body directed by Communists. The Communists do not hesitate to practice sabotage when it serves their ends. But it should be remembered that they had little need of sabotage prior to 1947. Economic and partisan conflicts proved quite sufficient to paralyze state authority.

No, we must go farther in our analysis of the French unions and parties. In England and in Belgium the unions are closely connected with the workingclass parties; together they exert an almost unquestioned authority on the masses. The British unions are financial as well as economic forces. In Belgium the numerous cooperatives and people's banks also constitute an economic power. The directors have a sense of reality and the habit of responsibility. The influence of the unions does not enhance the political acumen of the Socialist Party or the British Labor Party, but it does unquestionably give them a practical sense, an awareness of what is possible and what is not possible. French socialism and trade unionism present no parallel.

The French trade union movement is the most sterile in Western Europe in economic or cultural accomplishments. It has limited itself almost exclusively to pressing the demands of the workers and has done next to nothing for workers' education or the formation of cadres. True, a few union leaders have been included in the boards of directors of nationalized concerns. Others have risen to leadership in the Socialist Party. But here their influence is limited. Socialist officialdom consists largely of civil servants, academicians, lawyers, largely provincial and petty bourgeois, with a limited intellectual horizon and feeble technical talents. The leadership of the MRP is drawn from a somewhat broader base. Perhaps with a few years of experience, they will show real ability. But by and large the parliamentary personnel of France consists of professional politicians living in a constant state of alarm over the repercussions of their acts, because they are not sure of their followers, because they are not rooted in national reality.

The French socialist party calls itself SFIO, *section française de l'internationale ouvrière,* but it has lost the support of the majority of the French workers, who have gone over to the Communists. It is largely made up of petty bourgeois, white-collar workers, civil servants; it has abandoned all revolutionary aims and desires only to improve the conditions of the workers in general, of its own followers in particular. The

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MRP owes its spectacular success to the liberation, to the decline of the old moderate and right wing parties, to the prestige of the resistance and of General De Gaulle, to the support of small Christian democratic groups. But though it has polled some twenty-five percent of the votes, more than half of these represent casual supporters who today in all probability would vote for the RPF.

In other words, all these centrist groups (we have mentioned only the two principal ones) face an uncertain future. They are based on strictly political associations of committees or individuals, which are far from exerting any decisive nation-wide influence. It seems to me that the instability of all moderate coalitions is explained by the following factors: mediocre leadership, precarious parties, the sacrificing of practical needs to electoral or ideological considerations.

Before the first World War, when the leading issues were lay education and the separation of Church and State, when the public services were in the hands of a vigorous administration, when the economy ran along by itself, all this political foolery was not incompatible with general prosperity. Today this is no longer the case. It is not possible to make the State responsible for an immense nationalized sector of the economy, for the execution of an ambitious industrial plan, and the regulation of wages, and at the same time allow this state to be directed by incompetent and short-lived cabinets, dependent on the decisions and maneuvers of irresponsible committees. The contradiction is glaring enough to be recognized by all.

Many observers are inclined to identify the prospects for democracy in France with the prospects of the Third Force, that is, of the parliamentary grouping composed of parties that are neither Communist nor Gaullist. If we formulate the problem in these terms, it is hard not to be pessimistic. This grouping, which today probably represents less than one-third of the electorate, is characteristic of a certain form of parliamentary democracy that is specifically condemned, both by its own weaknesses and by the circumstances.

It cannot be argued that this brand of democracy is the victim of the concerted assault of Gaullism and Communism. Before the founding of the RPF, it was just as incapable of governing. Actually, the threat of the RPF inspired it for a few months with an energy and cohesion it had never had before. But fear was only the beginning of wisdom. And this beginning was not enough.

The evils of the Fourth Republic, as we have analyzed them, reveal nothing, or next to nothing, that is specifically French, nothing that can be said to be bound up with the specific nature of French psychology

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

or French historical development. At most, one might say that the conflicts between the middle road parties which share the government are due to the memories of past conflicts, that Catholics (MRP) and laity (socialists) are less in disagreement on the problems of today than on those of yesterday, that in their sterile bickerings they are the victims of a historical heritage. Yet in my opinion, the weight of history is not the true obstacle to collaboration between the moderate parties: the true difficulty is that the socialists, who today have no other doctrine than government control, are reluctant to accept a gradual return to more liberal methods. The present economic regime is contradictory: either there must be a return to conditions that permit the circulation of private capital, that encourage savings and make investments possible; or else, the authoritarian organization of economic life must be carried further. In neither case can French parliamentarism remain as it is today.

Raymond Aron

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THEATER CHRONICLE

SARTRE AS PLAYWRIGHT

Perhaps it is not too soon to offer a few observations on Sartre's dramaturgy, and on his sudden career in the American Theater. I take as my text three of his plays: *No Exit,* as produced by the *Theatre Intime* in Princeton, *The Victors,* produced by New Stages in their Bleecker Street theater, and *Red Gloves,* the Jed Harris production, late of the Mansfield.

No Exit was the first of Sartre's plays to attract wide attention in this country. Garcin, a pacifist who subtly betrayed his cause, his comrades and his wife; Inez, a lesbian who drove a man and a woman to their deaths, and Estelle, a faithless wife who drove her lover to suicide, have died and meet in Hell. Hell consists for them in the fact that they are confined together in an ugly second empire parlor. They are literally everything to each other, for they can see themselves, confirm their own existences, only in each other's eyes. They begin to hate each other after the first five minutes; for they discover that they can get no satisfaction from each other, not even that of lust. Estelle is not a lesbian, and she and Garcin cannot get together because Garcin suffers from a kind of guilty *pudeur,* he loses his enthusiasm when Inez, watching his advances to the willing Estelle, makes scornful comments. Garcin puts their plight succintly: "Hell is other people." When this little trap has been explained with great dialectical ingenuity and with mounting suspense, the three see that their punishment is to consist of an eternity of each other's murderous scrutiny; and the curtain falls.

The Victors was adapted by Thornton Wilder from Sartre's *Morts Sans Sépulture.* I think Mr. Wilder did a competent and faithful job of translation, but I am judging on the basis of the performance which seemed to me to preserve the intent of the original. The acting (which was in general good, and sometimes superb) may account for a good deal of the vitality of the play. The story is that of a group of Maquis captured by the Vichy police, at about the time of the early Allied victories in Normandy. The police torture the captives, to make them reveal the whereabouts of their leader. The Maquis are a varied group, illustrating every possible attitude to torture, from an experienced revolutionary who takes it calmly, to a fifteen-year-old boy who collapses at the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mere thought, and including one woman. The leader himself is added to this group when the police arrest him, not knowing who he is; and though he is in no physical danger, he is soon morally "engaged" in the ordeal, and suffers a more painful case of *Angst* than the actual victims. Upon this situation Sartre plays many ingenious variations. One of the men murders the boy, and then engages in some painful casuistry to justify the murder. The woman is raped, and the physical coward commits suicide. In the final scene, when the leader has been released, the captives can reveal his former hiding place without betraying the cause; and this produces a new *cas de conscience* for them to debate: is it better to go free, or to stay, for the sake of thwarting their tormentors? They finally decide for freedom, but one of the policemen shoots them anyway to indulge a purely personal appetite for cruelty.

Jed Harris's production of *Red Gloves,* adapted by Daniel Taradash from *Les Mains Sales,* was a skillful job of denaturing Sartre for the Broadway market. *Les Mains Sales,* as Sartre wrote it, is a grim contemporary parable of *Existenz,* illustrating the same metaphysical extremity as all his other plays. Hugo, a young man from a well-to-do family in a central European country, has joined the Communist Party because he feels the need to prove himself in action, and has an idealistic faith (which Sartre does not share) in the redemptive destiny of the proletariat. The Russians are beginning to drive the German armies back; soon they will arrive. Hoederer (the local Communist chief) wants to make a coalition with the liberals and conservatives in order to take power as bloodlessly as possible, but the comrades think this a betrayal of the Party line, and they decree that Hoederer must be liquidated. Hugo volunteers for this job, is made Hoederer's secretary, and, with his nice young wife Jessica, moves into the old palace where the Party has its headquarters. But when he actually sees Hoederer, and hears his side of the story, he doesn't want to kill him. Thus he is caught in an impossible situation: he does not recognize his moral freedom either in murdering or not murdering: it is the familiar existential mixture of pride and self-hatred, intensified by an obsessive need to make a crucial decision. His wife unwittingly helps him out of this blind alley: bored with his indecision, she makes love to Hoederer. Hoederer demurs at first; an affair with Jessica would ruin a good secretary; but at last (candidly explaining that he hasn't had a woman in six months) he sighs and kisses her. This little vacation from Party matters is his undoing: Hugo catches them and shoots Hoederer. This, however, solves nothing for Hugo. He is sent to prison for the murder, but released with the other political prisoners when the Russians arrive, and he carries his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

existential problem right along with him. Was the murder heroism—the gesture of a big man of action such as he had always wanted to be—or was it a mere bourgeois crime of passion? He also finds, when he is released, and looks up his tough Party mistress, Olga, that the Party line has changed: Hoederer's policy of boring from within has been adopted, and Hoederer is canonized as a martyr to the orthodox cause. Hugo's crucial choice now appears in other terms, closer to what Sartre thinks of as the one reality of the human situation: He may either rejoin the party in another country under another name, or keep his name, together with the blame or credit for the murder. Since the murder is all he has to call his own, the only sign of his existence, he chooses the latter alternative, and cheerfully marches off with the comrades to be liquidated.

Mr. Taradash's *Red Gloves* keeps the main facts of this typical and very skillful Sartre plot. His changes were chiefly cuts, in the role of Olga, Hugo's communist mistress (reduced in his version to a perfunctory lay figure who merely gives information) and in the scenes between Hugo and Jessica. But the effect of these cuts was to make a very different play, in which Hugo is no longer the protagonist, and the existential theme is almost lost to sight. In *Les Mains Sales* we learn (mostly by way of Hugo's relation to Olga) that he identifies himself with Raskolnikov, and even took the name of this hero to use in the Party. Thus he inherits the sterile willfulness of that long line of lost young highbrows who are Sartre's own ancestors—Julien Sorel, Ivan Karamazov, Gide's immoralist, and the rest; and so we understand more richly the absurd incommensurability between his platonic infatuation with the idea of action, and the Realpolitik of the comrades themselves. In *Les Main Sales* the relation between Hugo and Jessica is also much more developed than it is in *Red Gloves*; and Sartre completely understands their childish eroticism, so abstract and irresponsible that it is hardly sexual at all. In the economy of his play, this relationship establishes the background of futility, emptiness and moral anarchy which we must have if we are to accept Hugo's compulsion to murder. When Mr. Taradash drastically reduced these elements, he cut most of the crazy intensity out of the role of Hugo, leaving Hoederer the center of interest. In the performance, Boyer's authority and intelligence also helped to make that role overshadow all the rest, and to turn the play into a study of a saintly commissar (Yogi and thug in one) who is martyrized by his myopic associates.

I have remarked that Messrs Harris and Taradash between them did a skillful job of transforming Sartre's sardonic parable into the sleek

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

suburban terms of serious, or "better," Broadway. The production was handsome, and granted that version of the play, the acting was good. John Dall, for instance, as Hugo, was certainly not acting the role which Sartre wrote, but he offered a shrewd and humorous portrait of a mildly leftish young American with horn-rimmed spectacles, a BA in Social Studies, and a minor job in the New Deal. One could not believe that such a young man would be that kind of a martyr to a theory of himself; the American analogue of Hugo would be Leopold or Loeb, rather than our bachelors of arts who take up government work and get into messes with Communism. In the same way, Joan Tetzel was charming as a nice young wife who is bored with her husband; but she was far from presenting the amoral little kitten Sartre had in mind.

These three plays, though the productions they received were different, and also the audiences they met, all proved to have great theatrical viability. There is no doubt that Sartre has found a way to make himself heard, even in our jaded and confused theaters. He has the authentic playwright's gift for living speech, and for characters with the immediate impact of newsreel closeups. He is also an extremely resourceful plot-maker in the French tradition—the French word for plot is "intrigue." It would be a mistake to dismiss his plays merely because his existentialism is so feeble as ethics or epistemology. But his philosophy did lead him to his dramaturgic formula. He writes a "drama of crisis" on the analogy of Barth's "theology of crisis"; and it is this existentialist slant that gives the new look to his moral casuistry and his gripping well-made plots.

Each of his plays illustrates the extreme, or existential situation, but his style has changed and grown a good deal. In his first plays he tries to put his metaphysical point unrealistically, in *The Flies* by means of the Orestes myth, in *No Exit* by the metaphor of Hell. But his didactism is too violent and literal for this style (which he may have learned from Giraudoux) and the photographic realism of *The Respectful Prostitute, The Victors,* and *Red Gloves* serves his purposes better. Contemporary life offers plenty of extreme situations, with all the authority of the headline and all the fascination of the street-accident. He found one in this country also—that of the Negro unjustly accused of murder. I can think of another which he has overlooked: a visit to the dentist. Here too we have an inescapable ordeal with an obsessive power; a form of torment which threatens the very basis of human freedom, and which only the heroic can survive with dignity:

Beneath the bludgeoning of fate
My head is bloody but unbowed.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

And this situation is more austerely existential than most of the ones he has used: it is more abstract, and may the more easily be considered apart from ultimate values.

I think that all three audiences which I observed at his plays, though unquestionably held during the performance, were in the long run somewhat let down by this abstract nature of his basic situation—the moral crisis considered apart from ultimate common values. "I have suppressed God the Father," he tells us; and he adds that there is no such thing as human nature. He is consistent enough to suppress also all the up-to-date versions of a common end: he is not interested in the Communism of his characters in *Red Gloves,* nor in the Cause of his Maquis in *The Victors,* nor in the actual problem of racial justice in the South—these issues merely precipitate extreme situations which illustrate his peculiar moral athleticism in a meaningless world. The *Red Gloves* production softened this metaphysical anarchism, inviting the rather puzzled audience to interpret the play in a long-suffering liberal sense. The productions of *No Exit* and of *The Victors,* by the Princeton undergraduates and New Stages respectively, were true to the plays he wrote, and both had the honesty and disinterested pleasure in the theater which Broadway seldom offers; I am sorry I lack the space to do justice to these performances. But there too the audiences seemed slightly puzzled and unsatisfied, and for the same reason. The highbrow, socially-conscious Bleecker Street audience would seem to be the right one for Sartre, if we have it at all; but I thought they were first piqued, and then disappointed, to discover that *The Victors* was not an anti-Vichy tract.

The American Theater, trying to be up-to-date, groping about for material with some life in it, has received Sartre with enthusiasm and treated him as handsomely as it could, both on and off Broadway. But on the whole this encounter does not look very auspicious. As for Sartre himself, probably it would be necessary to see him in the livelier theatrical life of Paris, where he is only one voice in an animated, but not too serious discussion which has been going on for a long time, in order to place him in the proper perspective. Our dispersed, spasmodic and undernourished theater has nothing to digest him with. Until and unless we develop some sort of continuous theatrical life of our own, we shall be in the position of eavesdropping upon a conversation in the next flat, trying to make sense out of the fragments we get, and usually mistaking the most emphatic remarks for the most pregnant.

Francis Fergusson

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MUSIC CHRONICLE

The Case of Hindemith

It is not often that two performances of contemporary works of importance are so aptly, so tellingly juxtaposed as was the case recently in New York when Hindemith's revised *Marienleben* and Schoenberg's Second String Quartet were heard on two successive evenings.* Outwardly, the two occasions had much in common. Each work received a performance exceptionally sympathetic and impeccably brilliant; each was accepted with visible enthusiasm—that in the case of Schoenberg being, indeed, so vocally expressed that it was necessary to repeat the Finale. (How different from the famous 1908 performance when outraged Viennese yelled "Stop the Music!" and demanded that the hall be aired out after Schoenberg to make it fit for Beethoven's Harp Quartet!)

But right there the similarity ended. Ended, in fact, so completely and obviously that one who had attended both concerts was heard to say, "It's good to hear these works so close together—this way, one knows where one stands!" Yes, indeed one does; especially as Hindemith has made his own stand crystal-clear in the preface which he has written to the revised *Marienleben*, and of which the New Friends of Music gave their subscribers a generous portion in the customary program booklet. This remarkable and curious document possesses implications so startling, even frightening, that they demand the most careful examination and evaluation. That a composer should revise an earlier work of his in the light of twenty-five years of development and growth is entirely understandable. But that this revision should represent a *repudiation of development* is not so easy to comprehend. In effect, Hindemith invites the listener to turn his back on twenty-five years of musical progress (a word for which he appears to have a vast distaste); he delights in calling attention to the "unsingability" of much of the first version and in laying

* *Das Marienleben*, New Friends of Music, January 23 (Tourel and Kahn); Second String Quartet, International Society for Contemporary Music, January 24 (Pro Arte Quartet and Patricia Neway).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the blame for this upon the "outgrown" belief that a new polyphonic period was in the making at the time he wrote it. The spectacle of a composer publicly excoriating himself for having written music which he must once have considered noble (else why write it at all?) is indeed calculated to fill one with suspicion. One remembers the words of Adolf Loos: "No man repudiates that which he has created. Neither the artisan nor the artist. Neither the cobbler nor the musician. . . . The shoes which the master made ten years ago were good shoes. Why should he be ashamed of them? Why should he deny them?" And the words of Schoenberg, who recently wrote with his characteristic frankness that he likes all his works because he liked them when he wrote them. In contrast to these attitudes, Hindemith's recantation reminds us all too vividly of certain recantations for political reasons about which we have been hearing so much in recent days. It is droll to think of the "evils of counterpoint" as equated with the "evils of capitalism"—but to this reader, at least, the comparison irresistibly suggested itself in the light of current news events.

Of course, Hindemith tries to escape the accusation of having made inartistic concessions to the hearer or the singer by placing all of his arguments on a very high ethical and moral basis. As a personal attitude this is worthy of respect, but it is to be feared that—human nature being what it is—those influenced by this manifesto will disregard the spiritual trappings and will reach straight for the concessions. The most arrogant reactionaries will find their defense in Hindemith's bland statement that, after all, the *Ars nova* of our time has been going on ever since Beethoven and that consequently the search for something "new" today can hardly be motivated by anything but sensationalism. And, in this connection, it is unfortunate that the composer, instead of merely analyzing dispassionately the differences between the new version and the old, felt himself obliged in addition to indulge in thinly veiled personalities. One cannot doubt who is the target of the embittered words about unheard-of and unheard harmonies, about melodies so inspired that they cannot be played or understood, about Trismegistus-like systems of composition. And the inclusion of these words in the program-book of an organization which is supposedly devoting this season and the next to honoring Schoenberg (by fits and starts) is—albeit unintentionally—a flagrant affront to taste.

Schoenberg's Second Quartet came to us without manifesto or program-notes. It needed none. *"Ich fühle Luft von anderen Planeten,"* the first line of the poem of Stefan George which forms the core of the Finale, is sufficient text and commentary. The line has often, and I think

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rightly, been interpreted as the verbal symbol of Schoenberg's leap into a new musical world, which takes place in the quartet before our very eyes, for it is in the Finale that he first succeeds in transcending tonality. But one must also not forget that this whole poem corresponds in a very special way to Schoenberg's profound and yearning mysticism. The point becomes of importance with reference to the piquant juxtaposition of just this work of Schoenberg with *Das Marienleben*. Hindemith talks much about spirituality. In *Das Marienleben* it is constantly being presented to us in pictures of a vivid and personal kind—a sort of spirituality arranged for practical everyday use and neatly contained within the "handy two-part framework." In Schoenberg's Second Quartet there are no longer any persons, any figures; there is only the universal and the superpersonal. *"Ich bin ein Funke nur vom heiligen Feuer, ich bin ein Dröhnen nur der heiligen Stimme."* The words are George's but this is Schoenberg's spirituality—deep and spontaneous, not presented as part of a preconceived plan for the ethical betterment of music. Of the countless impressions conveyed by this particular Schoenberg performance, perhaps it was this one which, at the end, was preserved most vividly in the memory.

Les Schoenbergeries

It was refreshing to hear more Schoenberg at concerts of the YMHA, about which little fuss is made because they are not reviewed, but which do become known to those interested enough to seek them out. In this jubilee year of Schoenberg's (he will be seventy-five on September 13) it is heartening to listen to people like Kolisch and Steuermann who keep right on playing his music because they always have liked playing it and always will, not because this is an anniversary year and there is a vague compulsion to "do something," however little, about it—a state of mind not absent from our leading concert organizations. (But at least this time the upsurge of interest is taking place in the composer's lifetime, as it did not in the case of Bartok!) On February 10, Steuermann achieved the unlikely-sounding feat of presenting a program in which Schoenberg, beside Reger's Bach variations and the *Hammerklavier*, was actually the "lightest" number! His performance of his own extraordinary transcription of the first *Kammersymphonie* might once more raise the age-old question of the desirability of including transcriptions in piano recitals—but only for a moment; if one must choose, Schoen-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

berg is far better served by so perceptive a performance of an "arrangement" of his work than by so incredibly incompetent a rendition as that which the same piece received last season at the hands of the much-touted Little Symphony. Much is lost through the absence of the sonorities of the chamber orchestra; but much is gained through the coördination of the complex polyphony in a single mind and a single pair of hands. This transcription deserves to be heard oftener (of course without prejudice to the original)—and why should it not be played by other pianists too?

After almost nine years the New Friends revived *Pierrot Lunaire** which had not been heard in that setting since November, 1940, when the composer conducted it there himself, with many of the same performers. What is particularly noticeable is the way in which the *Sprechgesang* itself has evolved, as indicated in the current interpretation of Erika Wagner. It has become more and more plastic and flexible, and has less and less to do with the visual picture of the notes as presented in the score, so that Schoenberg's original indication that the pitches indicated by the little crosses are to be touched upon and then left is now hardly observed at all. This is not a mistake on the part of either performer or composer, but rather represents a gradual maturing of the whole idea of *Sprechgesang,* a liberation of this wonderfully versatile technique from any arbitrary restrictions. That this is true, two pieces of evidence prove: 1) the recording of *Pierrot* made under Schoenberg's direction nine years ago, in which the current interpretation is already well under way; 2) Schoenberg's own present method of notating *Sprechgesang* on, above, and below one line only. Composers concerned with *Sprechgesang* technique will wish to take note of this change of emphasis on the part of its past master.

Incidentally, it was cause for pleasure that the same performers had the chance to give a "prevue" performance of *Pierrot* two days earlier, before a predominantly student audience at St. John's College in Annapolis. The young people demanded, and got, a repetition of the last three recitations. This sort of "decentralization" is of the first importance. If the cultivation and admiration of Schoenberg is permitted or encouraged to confine itself to little circles in New York and Hollywood, the movement, at present promisingly healthy, which it engenders will be condemning itself, in America at any rate, to a most unnatural death.

* February 20, with Fritz Stiedry, Erika Wagner, Edward Steuermann, and others.

Dika Newlin

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

MAGAZINE CHRONICLE

A long look into recent magazine files is a harrowing experience, for while one knows we live in a cultural babel, that knowledge is as nothing to its confirmation. But rather than play Cassandra, I shall note a few trends in the magazines of the past two years, with the hope that my discrete remarks may yet suggest a unity of opinion.

An important discussion has been initiated by Richard Chase in his attacks on "ordealist" critics, those who "set up an alleged dichotomy between the Artist and the World and assume that the essential aesthetic and moral quality of art is alienation. . . . The ordealist critic cannot help reducing Melville to the stature of Jack London, and Mark Twain to the stature of Artemus Ward. Criticism becomes not the study of books but the study of suffering and failure. . . . " (*Sewanee*)

The notion of alienation refers primarily to the relationship of the artist (or intellectual) and society. Bourgeois society becomes increasingly inhospitable, stifling the artists' creativity and initiative; consequently he finds himself, regardless of his political views, in fundamental opposition to its values and styles of life. All this is hardly news—but it is the core of the statement that the artist is alienated, a statement of historical description subject to empirical test.

Chase may have been stimulated to his views by Lionel Trilling's argument in a 1945 PARTISAN REVIEW that there is no special neurotic quality to the artistic life and that, on the contrary, the artistic act is an oasis of health in the modern world. That supra-historical generalizations on this subject are profitable I greatly doubt, but at least for the span of capitalist society I think Trilling wrong. In any case, the tie between Trilling's and Chase's views is largely associational and temperamental rather than logically necessary; one can believe the artist to be alienated from modern society without seeing him as uniquely neurotic. But while possible, this view is hardly fruitful, except to those who admit alienation to be a fact of life but, consciously or not, feel neurosis to bear some moral stigma.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Which leads us directly to Harold Rosenberg's denial that the artist is "alienated from reality" (a claim no one could make short of believing all artists to be psychotic), and his insistence that to speak of the artist's alienation is to view "every departure from the common experience [as] . . . . an abnormality requiring some form of explanation" (*Commentary*). Here a historical descriptive is twisted into a normative statement. To say that the artist is alienated from society is not to consider him "abnormal" unless one accepts the psychology of "adjustment." That Rosenberg seems unwittingly to accept that pejorative view of alienation is evident from his attack on several reviewers who described Kafka and Dostoevsky as neurotic; for why should anyone object to that accurate enough description unless he feels it, somehow, a term of disparagement or insult?

Having seen that the problem of alienation is not necessarily concerned with the artist's greater or lesser neurosis (Trilling) or to moral attitudes engendered by it (Rosenberg), we can now return to Chase. Whether he knows it or not, Chase is denying the relevance of history to criticism. He speaks of the *alleged* dichotomy between the artist and the world, an extraordinary remark to make so late in the game. Is not the entire history of modern culture glaring evidence of that dichotomy? Chase's objection to the "ordealist" concern with suffering and failure rather than books shows the unhappy consequences of the recent critical bias against historical evidence. For, in practice, can an intelligent critic consider one without the other? Can you understand Twain's books without knowing about his failures, and is there any point to knowing about his failures except in relation to his books? As for seeing the essential quality of art as alienation, is that, by now, a critical eccentricity or an historical mandate? No one could see *only* alienation in modern writing, but is it not a remarkably pervasive and obsessive theme?

Admittedly, Chase has a point when he says that the "ordealists" run the danger of reducing all writers to one sociological level, but that danger must be faced by any critic who brings extra-aesthetic considerations to bear on a work of art. To understand the difference in achievement between a Twain and a Ward it is also necessary to know what was common in their experience. But without the notion of alienation the critic gets lost in modern writing, and is unable to understand why a number of themes persistently cut through it. This notion is indispensable to seeing the writer in the modern historical context. Of course, it will not "by itself" perform an act of judgment for you, but then neither will any other extra-aesthetic category. Without it, however, the critic runs the risk of irrelevance.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Serious discussions engender not so serious diversions. In the *Hudson Review* William Arrowsmith charges that the critics of alienation frame a definition of modern art that excludes the writers "who had managed, by some strategy or other, to overcome or exercise [exorcise?] the very real alienation of the American artist." One would give a handful of pennies to learn about that "strategy or other"—as if alienation were something of the order of a common cold. As American writers who are not alienated Arrowsmith names Tate, Eliot, Robinson, Warren and Faulkner. . . .

Another anti-alienation critic attacks Newton Arvin's *Hawthorne* on the grounds that while filling "the needs . . . of the 'twenties . . . [it] has little to offer the late 'forties." (The late 'forties, when we became adjusted?) Arvin's book is "dated" because it is "somewhat Marxist, somewhat Freudian, very Bohemian." (*Western Review*) There we have it: the academic mind harassed by the three modern furies.

We are supposed to be living in an age of critical marvels.* Reading the magazines, one expects high ingenuity and deep erudition, close burrowing into texts and the use of fine discriminations of taste and terminology. But it's not so. Most literary magazines suffer not from an excess of these qualities, insufficient as even they might be, but from a lack of them. The bulk of current criticism is a variety of moralistic impressionism. Having been warned of the "genetic fallacy," our critics avoid social or psychological concepts like the very plague; but give them a roomy and portentous moral abstraction and they will abandon their texts with light heart. Too many are amateur philosophers using literary criticism as an occasion for sermons on Love and Evil, God and Man, Reality and Appearance, Nemesis and Fate. No doubt, such terms cannot altogether be avoided in criticism, but to do the job one should go to that devilish critical trouble of *intimately* relating them to the text at hand—and if that attempt were made I would guess that they could usually be dispensed with. And the critics seem to see no inconsistency in resorting to imprecise moral terms in criticism after having excoriated others for using more precise social terms.

Item. Reviewing Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* in *Sewanee Review,* Andrew Lytle analyzes its adolescent hero's "identification between race and manhood" in terms of the novel's version of southern life and then adds that the identification represents "both Nemesis and Fate." What

* We are also supposed to be living in an age of scrupulous standards. How then explain a reputable journal printing such stuff as this: "The Yeats-Eliot-James-Pound-Kafka, *Partisan Review,* Burnham-and-brimstone school of literary politics" (*Accent*)—whatever "school" that may be.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

do these ponderous abstractions add to his already precise reading of the novel? *Item.* Yvor Winters' beratement of Robert Frost for not properly adhering to "the principles of Greek and Christian thought" and for succumbing to "the principles of Emersonian and Thoreauistic Romanticism." (*Sewanee*) *Item.* Robert Heilman's ingenious but anti-literary version of *The Turn of the Screw* as a Christian allegory on Original Sin. (*University of Kansas City Review*) *Item.* Richard Chase's reading of *Billy Budd,* perceptive in denying the story tragic stature, but forced by extraneous moral-political considerations to label Claggart a personification of liberalism—a violent wrenching of Melville's text. (*Partisan*) *Item.* Mark Schorer's insistence that only "*achieved* content, the form" of a novel is a proper subject for criticism and his subsequent humorless and unhistorical dismissal of *Moll Flanders* as "a morality somewhat less than skin deep, having no relation to motives arising from a sense of good or evil. . . . " (*Hudson*) (Read: "A portrait of capitalist society somewhat less than skin deep, showing no relation between the proletariat and the struggle for revolutionary power. . . . ") *Item.* Most revealing of all, the helplessness of most critics before Trilling's *The Middle of the Journey,* some applauding on doctrinal grounds, others rejecting on doctrinal grounds, but almost all unable to relate its ideas to its structure and hence evaluate it as a novel of ideas.

Perhaps the most interesting of recent prevalent critical approaches has been the attempt to interpret literary works by noting their underlying patterns of myth and ritual. This approach requires special tact, for it invariably tempts the critic to lodge and lose the work within the folds of the myth. Skillfully handled, it can occasionally suggest meanings of depth which a foreground analysis might not divulge.

An accomplished example of this approach is Francis Fergusson's essay on *Oedipus Rex* in *Accent.* Fergusson seeks to restore the play to its position in Greek life, where Sophocles could assume a "*ritual expectancy*" on the part of his audience. To it the play must have been an experience "imitating and celebrating the *mystery* of human nature and destiny. And this mystery was at once that of individual growth and development, and that of the precarious life in the human City." Now this placement of the play in its context of the Greek theater is certainly indispensable to its proper understanding; but to see that context merely in terms of ritual origins is to ignore another and at least as interesting problem: to what degree did Sophocles' audience still view the play as version of ritual and to what degree as sophisticated dramatic fiction? That question, essential to an understanding of the play, cannot be answered solely by a resort to myth.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The great difficulty with the mythic or ritual approach, even when used so skillfully as by Fergusson, is that it tends to brush aside the difference between ritual base and the conscious making of a work of art. To the extent that the play is dissolved back into the ritual from which it presumably evolved, to that extent does the critic lose the foreground meaning directly derivable from the text itself. For Sophocles was a playwright, not a priest, and to see the products of his imagination as versions of a folk myth can give a misleading view of the creative imagination and its processes.*

Not only does the mythic approach tend to reduce the highly sophisticated activity of art to a relatively simple folk belief or ceremony; it also fails to provide any clues to the historical development of art. At one point Fergusson asks: "Is Oedipus really guilty, or simply a victim of the gods, of his famous complex, of fate, of original sin?" That is *the* question of the play, and no doubt an answer is more readily provided if we know something about its ritual base. But that knowledge alone can lead to a valid answer only if we assume that Sophocles' meaning is completely congruent with the meaning attributed in Greek life to the ritual on which the play is based—a most daring assumption. Nor can the appeal to ritual or myth explain why or how Sophocles' answer to the question of Oedipus' guilt changed so radically from *Oedipus Rex* to *Oedipus at Colonnus.*

The reading of a work of art in terms of myth evaluates it no more than a reading in terms of psychoanalytical categories; the myths of Sophocles can also be found in a mystery story. In most instances, I think, reference to myth is less useful than the more specific reference to contemporary social or psychoanalytical content. For the literary process begins when the bone of myth is fleshed with the blood and muscle of immediate experience; to establish how well that fleshing has been done is the critic's primary job.

These remarks are not to be taken as directed against Fergusson's essay, for he is careful to avoid the difficulties I have mentioned. The danger in the myth approach is that it allows epigones to run wild—away from the meanings of literature. Thus Stanley Edgar Hyman writes: "The concept of such ancient tribal rituals as initiations, fertility, the

* A similar point can be made about William Troy's analysis of the modern novel, *The Great Gatsby.* He makes a mythic statement: "the book takes on the pattern and meaning of a Grail-romance—or of the initiation ritual on which it is based." He also says: "Gatsby . . . becomes a symbol of America itself, dedicated to the 'service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty'" (*Accent,* Autumn 1945). The first statement is interesting, but the second one, in which there is no resort to initiation ritual, gives the essential meaning of the book.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

totemic feast, purification and expiation ceremonies, the killing of the god-king, etc. . . . [underlies] Conrad's plots. . . . " (*Accent*) What does this statement, even if true, tell us about Conrad's meanings? Purification from what? the killing of which god-king? Here the reference becomes a means of avoiding Conrad's specific meanings which are anchored to modern experience and which cannot be reduced to ritual patterns; and what is intended as a means of "rendering profound" actually empties the writing of its content.

The most useful textual criticism usually appears in the English magazine, *Scrutiny*. I am hardly an unconditional admirer of that sort of criticism, but if it is what you want *Scrutiny* is where to get it. Since the magazine is so peculiarly the work of one man, F. R. Leavis, a brief listing of his qualities may serve as a tentative estimate of *Scrutiny*. Leavis sticks to his texts, not letting himself be diverted by moral or theological preoccupations and not wrenching texts into prefigured ideational patterns; he writes without the pretentious, "aristocratic" verbal mannerisms of so many American critics; he quotes well and has a strong eye for dramatic qualities; he is especially good at dissecting one novel, such as *Daniel Deronda* or *Hard Times*. His deficiencies are serious though not crippling: he sometimes points to, rather than analyzes, the niceties he observes; his writing, while clear, lacks grace or verve; he is not adept at plot or thematic summaries; he is often angry without indicating any reasonable relationship between his anger and the matter at hand; he tends to be too magisterial, dismissing writers from "the tradition" as if he were a court of appeals; and he can be irritatingly obtuse about such moderns as Joyce and Auden. Are these faults related to his having fought English academicism from within the academy, an unhappy position bound to crib and crab even the toughest talent?

Recent issues of *Scrutiny* carry two pieces particularly worth noting: sharply critical estimates of Empson and Burke, two critics seldom so much as jostled in American journals. Marius Bewley on Burke ("so much of Burke's writing seems to end in frivolity") is particularly good. His two faults are characteristic of *Scrutiny* writing: his essay is too long, rambles and is poorly organized; he is unable or unwilling to analyze Burke's political history, either independently or *vis à vis* his criticism. This last is the central weakness of the *Scrutiny* writers.

By the time an idea hardens into doctrine, its pioneer advocates have usually become impatient with its limitations. Only the second

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rank and second generation defend the New Criticism zealously; the founding fathers are uneasy. Arthur Mizener is hardly a founding father, but his gentle polemic in *Sewanee Review* against Cleanth Brooks's inventory-like criticism is symptomatic of a trend. Mizener says he is only "arguing a matter of tactics." But he rejects Brooks's test for poetry ("complexity of attitude") by noting that "attitudes can be relatively simple and valuable." He disposes of Brooks's "heresy of paraphrase" doctrine by noting that paraphrase is unavoidable in criticism and that Brooks himself writes "a paraphrase of the poem's structure." He charges that Brooks fails to convey "the impression that great poetry is important precisely because it is . . . very intimately related to every man's experience." Good enough; but if these are the tactics of a supporter, what remains for the strategy of an opponent?

One founding father who has become impatient is R. P. Blackmur. His "A Burden for Critics" in *Hudson Review* codifies an uneasy abandonment of exclusively textual criticism; what it signifies a movement toward is harder to say. I would guess that he is seeking a greater critical "breadth" and perhaps the role of defender of liberal humanism (e.g., his remarks on Settembrini and Stepan Trofimovitch in his recent Mann and Dostoievsky essays). Noting the doctrinal content of the modern novels, he remarks: "That is what these works are about, and they cannot be judged aesthetically until full stock has been taken of what they are about." That verb "are about" is not congenial to the New Criticism. Having lately worked on the novel, Blackmur is absorbed by the novelist's "dominant convictions"—that is, what the novels *are about*. At this point: exit the New Criticism. But not quite, for Blackmur still remains suspicious of the social sciences in critical discussion. Consequently, John Crowe Ransom's description of his dilemma as critic seems apt: "Blackmur denies to the literary critic any commerce with the modern social sciences . . . yet the critic's major concerns, as Blackmur describes them, must be much the same as theirs." (*Kenyon*)

That dilemma is clearly to be seen in his essay on *The Possessed*. It is, he says, a political novel "only in the sense that a man can have politics whose way of dealing with life rested on the fundamental belief that a true rebirth . . . can come only after a great sin." (*Hudson*) Here Blackmur apprehends only one term of the Dostoievskian dialectic; for together with what he calls Dostoievsky's "non-social politics" of sin there is also his sinful mundane politics, the two in an unresolved tension: God-Russia-Church *versus* Liberalism-Socialism-Atheism. To place the novel in this context is to resort to historical evidence and measurements of a kind Blackmur is only partially willing to undertake. His hesitation

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

to do so explains why, for all its rich insights, his essay is unable to encompass the novel's full ideational meaning.

As one reads his essays, one feels that the problem goes beyond specific readings. He seems less interested now in texts and more absorbed by the general crisis of culture. He has always seemed to me to enjoy a particularly keen sense, if not an explicated idea, of that crisis; which is why one often feels that even when the foreground of his essays is murky their motivating drives are clear. Using his own term, *language as gesture,* we find in his recent essays gestures of possessed strain and preparation for prophecy. This is a new role and it brings with it the difficulty that prophecy, or even the critic's more modest concern with "the ordnance of deep gestures," can hardly be conducted along mere alleys of anti-dogmatist insight. That may be why one finds the strain more evident than the burden in the recent essays, though no doubt the burden is there too. One wonders, accordingly, what his Mann essay would come to if it were paraphrased into simple English—and surely paraphrase of criticism can hardly be a heresy. In a minor way, the problem reveals itself in his style. Not that the style is, as often charged, obscure; the question is rather whether it is a style for criticism at all, since there are some styles criticism cannot support without becoming something other than itself. May not the involutions of language be a gesture declaring the intolerable problem of thought—the style, that is, doing the work it cannot well do: the work of the mind. One wonders, while admiring the motives behind his new ventures, if the very nature of Blackmur's effort does not enforce failure; if his burden, without his quite realizing it, is that he is questing for an intellectual or prophetic stance that simply cannot be had. For between the prophet and the prophecy must fall the idea.

Where, all the while, is the opposition, the rebellious and exuberant *avantgarde?* Nowhere in sight, for it no longer exists. New magazines pop up regularly, but few show any distinct view or standard warranting a separate existence. Often, in fact, the little mags are more academic than the quarterlies—if by academic one refers to a quality of writing, a lack of motivating passion, an aura of work having been done as an exercise or pulled out with the forceps of will. It is curious that *Kenyon Review,* because of its editor's shrewd eclecticism in choosing contributors, manages to be livelier than most little magazines. For let us recognize it: we live in a time of intellectual regression, timidity and conformism. Whatever their absurdities and excesses, the thirties were at least vibrant with life and purpose, passion and dedication. (In some quarters the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

legend is sedulously spread that the thirties were *merely* proletarian literature and Granville Hicks. Cleanth Brooks has recently plumed himself on not having been caught up by the politics of the thirties—but is that so great a cause for pride?) Today the intellectual's honorable function—to cry stinking fish when the fish stink—is scorned by our younger dons, who think their education will be complete so soon as they absorb "the tradition" (as if it were a frozen vegetable that need only be thawed out). The younger critics copy all the weaknesses of the leading figures without absorbing any of their genuine strengths. A fear of ideas and of experience spreads like a pall over our literary magazines; no one takes chances, no one goes off on an independent path. As Kenneth Rexroth has remarked: "It is impossible to teach taste, but you can teach most anybody caution."

And the new magazines are cautious. *Hudson Review* solemnly announces that it "is committed to no politics or philosophy, but will not hesitate to consider these subjects where they affect the general cultural situation"—heroic measures for which it has not yet apparently found occasion. Nor is it sure it likes experience, especially raw anarchic experience, for its editors "commend those strategies and disciplines which hold experience in an objective frame and which prevent the dissolution of aesthetic constructs into anarchic sensation." (This sentence, obviously lifted from an attack on Joyce and Eliot of twenty years ago, also testifies to their fear of the English language.) *Hudson* reviews the Kinsey report along with two novels on homosexuality (clever, that!) and finds that it brings "before us once again the drastic concept of man as mechanism, the 'human male' as sluice-gate for a flood of appetites. . . . " *The "human male" as sluice-gate!* Alas, alas, one finds no flood of appetites in *Hudson Review;* only much caution, youth without youthfulness, obeisance to the proven great, and a rigid tight-lipped wish to shy away from those terrible anarchic sensations.

The Tiger's Eye recently announced an issue devoted to The Sublime. Its editors print a regular prose poem on the artistic vocation, one of which reads: "To be inspired. That is the Thing. To be possessed; to be bewitched; to be obsessed. That is the Thing." A review of Wallace Stevens begins: "The Man With the Blue Guitar Is Strumming again. . . . " Even when poetry is printed in pink ink on grey paper, it is bad if bad; and here it is bad, most of it. Actually this tiger's eye is not at all ferocious: look closely and you find such tame academia as a Chicago professor on Hardy As Thinker and Van Wyck Brooks on Melville in the Berkshires. In fact, the eye is rather rheumy with recollections of high school year-book *décor.* The main virtue of the magazine

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

is that it prints unknowns and helps feed them; if it stopped wasting money on fancy inks and papers, it could feed them better.

Neurotica is more a symptom than a magazine. Its character is summed up in the following juxtaposition. An article on "The Borderline Fetishist" declares: "One of the most stimulating forms of erotic material available to the fetishist is correspondence. Letters are inexpensive . . . and can go far beyond the limits set by . . . censorship." Twelve pages later there is a classified ad: "NEUROTIC hausfrau, Californian, seeks correspondence re neuroses and psychological lore."

Epoch and *Perspective* are two of the better little mags. They print some readable stories, though one wishes for a moratorium on the story about the sensitive Jewish boy's adolescent troubles. *Epoch* has also printed some intelligent criticism by Robert Gorham Davis and William Sales on ideas and content in fiction.

What else in the little mag field? *Furioso* is the only magazine I know whose editors seem to enjoy their work; they announce a Furioso Writer's Conference for which tents have not yet been purchased, and are currently celebrating, in properly long-winded fashion, their 434th Anniversary. . . . . A new magazine, *American Letters,* prints a piece on Southern writing by Eunice Glenn which urges the South to "set up its own literary standards" (now wouldn't that be something?)—and which is almost as chuckle-headed as Herbert McLuhan's remark that before the Civil War "one main condition of aristocratic life was present in the South and not in the North—personal responsibility to other human beings for education and material welfare" (*Sewanee*). . . . . About magazine fiction or poetry there are no generalizations that seem worth making. . . .

In recent months, there has been a spate of attacks on PARTISAN REVIEW, all for the wrong reasons, though few by anyone who knows something about the American radical milieu in which PARTISAN must be considered. As one reads these attacks, one cannot help wishing that they were true, that PARTISAN were really as bold, as dissident as its critics make it out. . . .

A curious tangent in our intellectual life is the recent appearance of amateur Jewish theologians recruited from among ex-Marxists, poets and literary men who discuss Hasidism, theology and the detested vulgarities of reform Judaism with a zeal possible only to those who do not take religious experience very seriously.

As soon as a writer evaluates theologies normatively, as soon as he rejects one version in behalf of another on theological grounds, he must

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

either seek God or expose himself as a dilettante. But as one reads the secular theologians in *Commentary* one wonders: do these people take seriously the categories they manipulate or is this discussion merely an occasion for Harold Rosenberg to demonstrate his dialectical skill? Do they, to be "crude" about it, believe or want to believe in God? Do they realize that Hasidism was not a mere ethic but a religious revival and that an attempt to isolate "its intrinsic doctrine, so that it may again inform a mode of living," as Leslie Fiedler proposes, is either absurdity or desecration? The Hasidism Fiedler celebrates has about as much resemblance to the Hasidism of historical actuality as has Eliot's Idea of a Christian Society to the historical actuality of Christian society.

Fiedler's besetting sin (I single him out because he is the most talented of the lot) is that he is here not quite serious and certainly quite sentimental. He admits that he is "casting about for a new way. Whether neo-Hasidism is a completely satisfactory answer, who can tell short of trying—and what else is there in sight?" This attitude may be all right for choosing a restaurant, even a temporary girl friend, but hardly for religious experience. As for the sentimentality: "Especially in his attitude toward sex," writes Fiedler, "the Jew in America is closer to the hasid than to his Gentile neighbor. Copulation is not to him a furtive extramarital pleasure, but the very sanctity of marriage. . . . " Met any American Jews lately, Leslie?

To take Martin Buber's cleansed and plucked version of Hasidism as an occasion for spiritual identification is sentimentality. The more intellectualized, the more devoid of religious passion our secular theologians are, the more sentimental becomes their fishing in the Jewish past.

The mindlessness of American liberalism continues to be exposed each week in *The Nation* and *The New Republic*. *The Nation* reacts to Russian maneuvres somewhat like Pavlov's creatures to the bell: let Stalin make a transparent "peace" gesture and Freda Kirchwey worries about slamming "the door in Stalin's face." *The Nation* is not Stalinist, but its incurable habit of reacting to each weekly diplomatic twist without keeping clearly in mind the fundamental nature of Stalinism results in a policy of appeasement through nervousness. Andrew Roth's and Alexander Werth's dispatches, blending cynicism and apologetics for the Stalinists; del Vayo's impossible nostalgia for the People's Front (which refutes the maxim: once burned, twice shy); Madeleine Jacobs' nasty piece on the Kravchenko trial; the recent editorial on Cardinal Mindzsenty ("Although the facts of the case have been obscured both

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

by Catholic hysterics and the ambiguous methods of Communist court procedure, the Cardinal's known record tends to substantiate his admissions")—all this does more good for Stalinism than a thousand *Daily Workers*. *The Nation*'s book section is quite consistently anti-Stalinist; how long can a magazine continue so schizophrenic an existence?

After the Wallace debacle, *The New Republic* changed both editors and policies, adopting a more or less ADA position. Yet its cultural tone remains as low and pedestrian as during Wallace's reign. Lionel Trilling's recent remark that ADA liberalism is as culturally (I would add, politically) barren as that of the PCA is here conclusively demonstrated. What a far cry from the literary editorship of Edmund Wilson!

We need in America a magazine that will leave literature to others but will engage in political and cultural criticism from a generally radical point of view, will not be afraid of being labeled highbrow or destructive, and will resist both Stalinist demagogy and lib-lab verbiage. There are more than enough literary magazines in America, but hardly a serious non-academic and non-party political one. Are there, however, still enough intellectuals who do not think politics debasing or vulgar?

Politics—especially today—is hardly a panacea; even a superior political consciousness would not necessarily ameliorate our cultural crisis. But I would strongly urge that a good many of the matters touched in these notes—from alienation of artists to Blackmur's recent criticism—can profitably be seen against a background of the disdain for and fear of politics that permeates American intellectual life. Admittedly, politics today is both difficult and unpleasant, especially for those who seek some independent position not tied to one or another power wagon. Perhaps, though I think not, we must even admit that we are politically up against the wall—but even then let us face that wall and not see hallucinations of rose-vines. There is, for intellectuals at least, one kind of politics that would help fill our voids and sweep aside the academicism, mystifications, and reaction noted here; and that is the politics of intellectual criticism, secular intransigeance, devotion to radical and scientific values, and a refusal to raise the flags of power. This minimum ground may be the price of survival. To say no—is that really so hard?

Irving Howe

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BOOKS

KAFKA'S FAILURE

THE DIARIES OF FRANZ KAFKA. Edited by Max Brod. Vol. I, 1910-1913, translated by Joseph Kresh; Vol. II, 1914-1923, translated by Martin Greenberg. Schocken Books. $3.75 (each).

It is curious that Max Brod should have felt it necessary to suppress certain passages in Kafka's diaries as "too intimate." What could be more "intimate" than *The Metamorphosis,* say, or *In the Penal Colony*? To admit authorship of these fantasies was to admit everything. If this does not seem obvious, it must be that we are still confused by the astonishing literalness and immediacy of Kafka's communication: not many writers have committed themselves to paper so fully, and yet this very fullness, this rigidly disciplined refusal of all concealment or evasion, is what most stands in one's way when one reads him for the first time. And doubtless it is this same quality that has called forth the clouds of Kafka exegesis, those dreary "interpretations" so hopelessly below the level of their subject—as though one burrowed into Kafka's profundities to escape the dreadful nakedness of his surface. Look once directly at that surface—not an easy thing to do, perhaps, with our insistence that every important work of art must conceal a usable doctrine—and one begins to see how much of Kafka's art is direct and shameless self-revelation.

It is, to be sure, a strange kind of self-revelation, entirely devoid of what for most men is the essential element of personal life: the details, what actually happened. But in this one case at least, the details really do not matter. Kafka gives us directly what the facts of his biography, however "intimate," could have revealed only indirectly; the "secret" Kafka labored so painfully to set down was not the content of his experience—how commonplace that was, after all—but its form. Thus: if he had conscientiously written the story of his engagement, it would have seemed that it was really possible for him to get married, just as he himself in the course of the engagement must have felt that it was possible; but he could not have written a story except on the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

assumption that marriage was not possible, and this assumption, even if it required a complete suppression of the facts, would have been correct. There is a perpetual discontinuity between Kafka and the world of other human beings (every "interpretation" is at bottom an attempt to conceal this), but the contours of his personality fit perfectly the contours of his art. In a sense, Kafka's personality is the final product of his art. The "real" Kafka is a certain way of writing (one might almost say: a certain kind of syntax).

Still, this is obviously more than the exact truth; that is, it is true only because he is dead and has become his books. While he still lived, there were always the "possibilities" of which he wrote so desperately (". . . . under what stone do they lie?")—he could not be *absolutely* sure they did not exist. (Perhaps Dora Dymant was a possibility realized.) The issue was never resolved except on the aesthetic level, and it remained to torment him at every moment in that half-life of the "normal" world which, even if he came to think of it (and rightly) as no life at all, was still in the most literal sense the life he had to lead. In this area of his existence, the details, such as they are, do have some relevance, and it is to this area that the diaries primarily belong. Kafka's fiction is from one point of view the record of his success; the diaries are the record of his failure, of the fragmentary and disjointed life that never came to anything.

Of Kafka one asks, not: what kind of man could have written these books?—but rather: how could the man who wrote these books have walked the streets? There is obviously no answer to such a question. And yet the diaries are relevant. If they bring us no closer to Kafka, they are of interest as one more element in what will never be a coherent picture; they give—as he puts it—"a kind of inkling of the way a life like this is constituted."

It is surprising to find in the earlier passages, despite the constant recurrence of despair, a sort of common-sense hopefulness; Kafka has not yet come to realize that the "possibilities" will recede infinitely—perhaps, after all, there is only some temporary impediment keeping him from life. Even his drive to write seems still to fall within a recognizable framework: one can see him, at moments, as a young man with strong "literary aspirations." He is capable of banality: "If the French were German in their essence, then how the Germans would admire them!"—later, he will have no energy to spare for this kind of thing. He seeks people out, talks with them, observes, is attracted or not. ("There are still one or two houses in which I have something to do. . . . ") He becomes acquainted with a troupe of Yiddish actors

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

visiting Prague and writes pages and pages about them, noting down the details of their appearance and mannerisms, the complicated plots of their plays, scraps of the Talmud; he becomes a close friend of the actor Löwy, falls in love with one of the actresses. The whole episode forms the brightest section of the diaries, and represents a sustained attempt on Kafka's part to circumvent his situation; in effect, it seems to have been an effort to entrap his father from behind, from the Jewish East—but, like all of Kafka's stratagems, it was conceived too far above the level of his enemy. (The father had this to say of his son's friendship with Löwy: "Whoever lies down with dogs gets up with fleas.") Apparently whatever important consequences the episode had were literary. And, thinking back over Kafka's account of it, one is not surprised that this should have been so: the brightness of the episode (like Kafka's personal "sociability," which still deceives Max Brod) is superficial—Kafka's concern with the actors remains fundamentally conceptual and lifeless, as if they belonged not to ordinary experience but to some stimulating intellectual regimen; all his detailed notations do not really evoke them as human beings.

This failure, not so much to understand other human beings as to experience their presence freely, can be seen throughout the diaries: they are peopled with wraiths; the discretion that leads Brod to identify so many of the chief characters by their initials is oddly appropriate. (In 1922, Kafka writes: "The gesture of rejection with which I was forever met did not mean: 'I do not love you,' but: 'You cannot love me.' . . . It is consequently incorrect to say that I have known the words, 'I love you'; I have known only the expectant stillness that should have been broken by my 'I love you,' that is all that I have known, nothing more.") Only in the travel notes, where Kafka can permit himself a relatively relaxed susceptibility to his surroundings, does one find the quality of "true" experience—for example, in a rather charming glimpse of Max Brod in Paris, young, "healthy," and slightly ridiculous. (It should be added that anyone would look ridiculous next to Kafka, once we have decided that it was not Kafka himself who was ridiculous.) In the diaries proper, the only really vivid portrait is of a lunatic, who obviously does not raise the problem of a personal relationship (". . . . how refreshing it is," Kafka writes, "to speak with a perfect fool").

But as Kafka records his personal failure—more and more desperately as time goes on—there is a corresponding effort towards success on the level of art, the only level where success was possible. The diaries offer only a glimpse of this struggle, in a certain number of fragments and false starts, but it is enough to give one a sense of how writing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

defined for Kafka the limits of his being. The man with "literary aspirations" disappears—indeed, as soon as one looks at him—and there emerges in his place a man whose existence is contained in a certain relationship to language, and for whom writing is as necessary as breathing but as painful as the breathing of one dying of tuberculosis. The least fragment of his art becomes a total assertion of his living presence, like the small movement with which the sick man announces that he is still there. If the personal failure was complete, the artistic success was, in a sense, absolute; one wonders, even, why anything more than fragments was necessary.

There is, certainly, a connection between the two levels of Kafka's existence—it can even be said that the connection is perfectly clear, that one cannot possibly miss it: one level is but the mirror image of the other—and yet it stretches across a gap of infinite dimensions. The failure and the success are not merely opposite "aspects" of Kafka's life: each is complete, each makes its own universe. Now and then we catch a glimpse of him making the leap from one to the other—for instance, when he writes, "This morning, for the first time in a long time, the joy again of imagining a knife twisted in my heart"—but even this tells us, not how the leap was made, but only that there was a leap.

Perhaps in the final pages of the diaries the two universes touch at last—when there can no longer be any question of success or failure, but only a despairing summation: "It is enough that the arrows fit exactly in the wounds that they have made." Disease and approaching death bring everything into a terrible harmony, the facts and the art together; when he writes down his temperature—"March 17: 99.3°"—it is like a line of poetry. But for him it was still suffering; that must be remembered. He writes, in 1920: "A segment has been cut out of the back of his head. The sun, and the whole world with it, peep in. It makes him nervous, it distracts him from his work, and moreover it irritates him that just he should be the one to be debarred from the spectacle."

Robert Warshow

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

POETRY CHRONICLE

TOYS IN BLOOD. By George Anthony. The Decker Press. $2.00.
IN PUBLIC, IN PRIVATE. By Edwin Denby. The Decker Press. $2.50.
SELECTED POEMS. By Elizabeth Daryush, with a foreword by Yvor Winters. The Swallow Press and William Morrow Co. $2.50.
ELEGIES FOR THE DEAD IN CYRENAICA. By Hamish Henderson. John Lehmann. 6s.
THE CHARITY OF THE STARS. By John Heath-Stubbs. Sloane. $2.50.
COLLECTED POEMS. By William Empson. Harcourt, Brace. $2.50.
THE NEW BRITISH POETS. Edited by Kenneth Rexroth. New Directions. $3.00.
NEW IRISH POETS. Edited by Devin A. Garrity. Devin-Adair. $3.50.

A poetry round-up is rarely a pleasant chore. If there are several books of merit, the necessary limitation of space induces a kind of claustrophobia. If, as is the case here, only one or two are important, the others—not utterly beyond the pale, yet hardly good enough to deserve extended discussion—are an embarrassment. The big fish here is Empson's *Collected Poems;* the rest are edible in varying degrees, with the exception of *In Public, In Private,* which looks suspiciously like a sculpin. On the whole, it's Lenten entertainment.

Both *Toys in Blood* and *In Public, In Private* are exercises in violent language, a sort of strident Euphuism. They differ, at a sufficiently low level, chiefly in that Mr. Anthony seems to be a writer of considerable taste and insight whose failure is traceable to his conception of poetry as unremitting, bludgeoning dazzlement, while Mr. Denby, from the evidence of his book, has neither taste, nor ear, nor control. "The country folk think me the shucks beneath / The caterpillar's phlegm" is perverse, but curable: at any rate, it suggests poetic intelligence; but "A mouth tastes spicy like geraniums / Eyes like sweet trout, ears like snails to eat / And when it's lower down the lover comes / He's washed all through by something awfully sweet" suggests only the most surd vulgarity, beyond cure. Indeed, a case can be made for *Toys in Blood,* caterpillar-phlegm and all: there is hardly one of these poems that would not benefit from verbal dilution and rhythmic relaxation, but none of them is lazy, none automatic, none out simply to cock a snoot at the professors. I find the book tedious; I would neither buy it nor recommend it; yet it is not contemptible. But except for one poem, "Aaron," which is amusingly constructed whatever its Message may be, I can discover nothing in *In Public, In Private* but mishandled metres, a yammering diction, and a brash inconsequence of intent. "One Sunday," sings Mr. Denby—

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

One Sunday a day-old baby looked right at my eyes
And turned its head away without the least surprise.

I shouldn't wonder. Let us, Reader, ours also turn.

The weight of Mr. Yvor Winter's name, to say nothing of the joyless relish with which he introduces the daughter of the late Robert Bridges to the American public, naturally predisposes one to find in Mrs. Daryush "one of the few distinguished poets of our century and a poet who can take her place without apology in the company of Campion and Herrick." Unhappily, I cannot follow him here. I can perceive in these sonnets and lyrics an engaging and often acute poetic sensibility; especially in the poems in "syllabic metre" I detect an extremely delicate handling of rhythms and rimes; but beyond this all my good will cannot go. In the first place, Mrs. Daryush has an unfortunate liking for costume jewelry in the archaic mode: her verses are studded with Thous and O'ers and the dreadful verb forms ending in *-eth,* and once she even manages an "I'th'unknown." In the second place, while it may be true that "she never seems to say more than she means," I cannot see that she means very much more than the gentle commonplaces of flowers, landscapes, compliment, elegy, loss—the *materia,* of course, of the world's highest poetry, but scarcely realized here. Mrs. Daryush is actually an attractive and very minor lyrist in the tradition of her great father, and presented as being no more than this she would stand a better chance of being heard. Mr. Winters' curiously stygian extravagances on her behalf are a disservice, really: the slight fluting is drowned out by the sounding brass.

I should feel a greater sense of proportion if he had devoted his attention to Hamish Henderson's *Elegies* instead—not that he would: they are neither metrical nor 'moral'—for here, it seems to me, is a great deal of the raw *materia* handled with a considerable amount of success. Mr. Henderson is a young Scot of great promise—for once a dust-jacket does not lie—whose poems in this book are "heroic elegies" springing from the fighting in North Africa. The style is apocalyptic—passionately compelling at its best, but constantly getting out of hand:

Let loose (rounds)
the exultant bounding hell-harrowing of sound.
Break the batteries. Confound
the damnable domination. Slake
the crashing breakers—húrled rúbble of the guns.
Dithering darkness, we'll wake you. Héll's bélls

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

blind you. Be broken, bleed
deathshead blackness!

Trembling on the verge of Pistolese, no doubt; the cat, if it is not exactly being torn, is at any rate being seriously stretched; and those accents give "Hell's bells" a disconcertingly rakish look; but for all that, the passage manages somehow to save itself: it batters itself into conviction. In spite of the roar and the howl it is actually less noisy, less uncomfortable, than the high-tension screaming of *Toys in Blood*. Yet it is not a tone that can be sustained, and it is unfortunate for his book that Captain Henderson invokes it so often. When he descends from it, as he does at the beginning of "Ninth Elegy"—a singularly moving meditation over a dead German soldier—he can be as quietly conclusive as an epitaph by Simonidês. (Indeed, it is instructive to compare this poem with the sensitive Mrs. Daryush's savage gloating—Mr. Winters admits that it is "almost brutally harsh"—over the retaliation-raids on German cities: the generosity, the *pietas*, of the soldier is an ironic footnote to the hysterical hatred of the civilian.) And finally it must be said that in his "Heroic Song for the Runners of Cyrene" his fusion of myth and actuality in a lyric medium of unerring rightness results in what is at once the finest poem in the book and one of the best war poems I have seen.

Another English poet, John Heath-Stubbs, makes his American début with *The Charity of the Stars*, and I regret that once again I must dissent from Received Opinion—uttered on this occasion by Mr. Stephen Spender. I will grant gladly that *The Charity* is a book of worthy poems, of handsomely constructed poems, of poems full of high sentence and mythological lore; but I must in all honesty add that I find them unreadable poems, poems dull beyond all the waters of Lethe. It is curious that they should be so extremely narcotic, for they are, as I have said, beautifully made. The fault is mine, of course; but not all the painful re-examination that I have made of the book stirs more in me than a languid admiration for the façade: *vox et praeterea vox*:

LEUCE

O Leuce, white walled island out of time,
Do the quiet waves, carved in blue hyaline,
Still hang their heads by the unprinted shore,
Far from all voice of surf, or sea-bird's cry;

And further inland, where through soft womanish turf
The stiff narcissus and the hyacinth break,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Dumb nightingales, caged in bright falling dew,
Strain their full notes for that recumbent pair—

Where great Achilles lies in Helen's lap
And only there enjoys the marble limbs?

There is a certain irritating quality about these mythological poems cast in the form of a rhetorical question that inevitably tempts me to retort, "Sir, I'm damned if I know." (Yet, for the sake of another instructive contrast, compare this limp query with the question that concludes Yeats's "Leda." Need one comment on this poem? You can see that it is correctly beautiful: "hyaline," and "narcissus" and "hyacinth," nightingales afflicted with laryngitis but bravely trying nevertheless—even those marble limbs lifted from Browning. What an apparatus! Only one phrase, "soft womanish turf," seems to live; and I'd rather not inspect even that too closely. . . .

I shall not be silly enough to pretend that I "understand" the poetry of William Empson: indeed, if a tenth part of my unassisted interpretation of his work is correct, it is so by accident and divination. It is no secret that he is difficult: at his most clotted (his word) he is just as overt as one of the darker passages in *Finnegans Wake*. Yet it is not because my betters have told me so that I say, not for the first time, that he is a poet of a very high order—a poet whose extraordinary demands upon the reader are justified by the brilliance of the illumination which even a partial comprehension provides. The *materia poetica* here is unbelievably rich, and thoroughly—more than thoroughly—worked.

In an earlier version of his explanatory Notes Mr. Empson compared his kind of poetry to the crossword puzzle. It is interesting that he has suppressed that comment in the present Notes: perhaps he feels that it somehow gave too much away; and clearly he feels that in his more recent work he is moving towards a less "clotted" style. And if "Autumn on Nan-Yueh" is to be taken as the norm of the later manner, he is critically right though (I think) aesthetically wrong; but this is hard to determine—he has written (or, at any rate, published) only twenty-six lines of poetry since before the war, and the evidence is too slight to go on. Be this as it may: the vast majority of the poems in this collection must be worked out painfully, according to his own critical method, word for word. It is a jumpy process: I think, for instance, that I have detected two typographical errors in the book, but it is just possible to see in them another twist of Ambiguity; and this is what Empson

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

does to one. Yet the contemplation of the poetry as such is an unflagging joy: the phrases, lines, passages that sing into the brain and stay there —"Blind Satan's voice rattled the whole of Hell"; "The heart of standing is we cannot fly"; "No man is sure he does not need to climb"; "We do not fly when we are clay. / We hope to fly when we are dust"; "It is the pain, it is the pain endures." But not even this delight is comparable to the satisfaction with which one remembers an entire poem about which one feels fairly secure: "This Last Pain," for example, which is everything which the pretense, the posturings, the flutings, the squeals noted elsewhere in this review are not. The *Collected Poems,* in spite of its aseptic, locked-door quality, is a book of enduring and deepening significance.

And so briefly to the anthologies. The new Irish poets, some thirty-seven in number, are notable only for the success with which they sustain a tone of humdrum. Only three of them—Seán Jennett, Brenda Chamberlain and Valentin Iremonger—speak above a whisper or move above a bog-trot. The others are variously coy, flat, AOH, wistful, and dead. The perfect gifte-booke for yr alderman. Kenneth Rexroth's *The New British Poets* is a different matter. In a brilliant, cantankerous, dogmatic preface he lays great stress on what he calls the New Romanticism, and he selects an entertaining and stimulating number of anarchical young men and women for a handful of poems apiece. By and large, the quality is well above the average; and several poets—one thinks of Anne Ridler, Kathleen Raine, Alex Comfort—are far more deserving than Mrs. Daryush or Mr. Heath-Stubbs of an American hearing. It is good that Joseph Gordon Macleod has been recalled to our attention; a pity that Richard Eberhart, who, though an American, is so closely associated with Empson and the Cambridge Group as to be in effect a British poet, has been omitted. But the game of *Why this and not that?* is an unrewarding one. Mr. Rexroth's anthology may safely be recommended for domestick consumption.

Dudley Fitts

HORIZON'S PERSPECTIVES

ENEMIES OF PROMISE. By Cyril Connolly. The Macmillan Company. $4.00.

Mr. Connolly presents himself quite simply as a literary critic with a particular and individual point of view: an editor, and a spokesman for the cultured minority of his generation. Like the great human-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ists, like Sainte-Beuve, he is interested in the whole man, and in the total human situation embracing both writers and readers.

The situation of his generation is illustrated, according to Mr. Connolly, by the Clever Young Man who appears as the hero in his friend's novels, such as Denis in *South Wind*. For those of us who are not English, we might further distinguish the Clever Young Man from what might be called the Empire Young Man. The product which the English public schools desire to produce is "able" but not too "intelligent." To explain the development of his point of view, Mr. Connolly includes a long autobiographical section giving the creative history of his own mentality.

The problem which is raised at the beginning of the book, namely, how to write a book that will last ten years, is neither rhetorical nor modest. (As Mr. Connolly notes in the introduction to this American reprint, he has succeeded, for the book was first published in England in 1938.) Ten years is one tenth of Connolly's possible life-span, and one third or one fourth of the intellectually critical period of his civilized contemporaries. And tomorrow not only will we be dead, but the cultivated tradition which we are part of may also be dead.

The first part of the book is devoted to an analysis of style, which is defined as "the relationship in art between form and content." The two dominant styles in English prose, the Mandarin and the Vernacular or Colloquial, their history, and present influence and development are discussed at length. One might take issue with Mr. Connolly that style is only the relationship between form and subject matter, which implies that the same content could be expressed in either. Perhaps only one style is possible to convey certain attitudes.

What Mr. Connolly seems to prefer is a Mandarin style that is rococo but not baroque—rich but not flowery. We can gather from his description of his childhood that beautiful words were as immediate as French pastries to him, and more stimulating if less nourishing. This ability to ingest, word by word, is perhaps why he overemphasizes style. Take such a remark as the following: " . . . it should be possible to learn as much about an author's income and sex-life from one paragraph of his writing as from his cheque stubs and his love-letters and . . . how well he writes, and who are his influences"; and this overemphasis is the reason why he can say that in *Ulysses*, Joyce is "trying to make his mind up as to the side he will take in the battle of the books."

It may be doubted, as Mr. Connolly suggests, that the young writer today will write the best books if he attempts to combine the formal tension and rapid movement of the realist Vernacular writers with the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

richness of phrase and image of the Mandarin writers. However, it is true that the Mandarins, Proust, James, Virginia Woolf, are more seriously read than Hemingway, Dos Passos, or Sherwood Anderson by the best young writers today. And as Mr. Connolly pointed out in his introduction to the Sitwell issue of *Horizon,* it is the Ivory Towerists who produced the best English literature in the thirties. One would certainly prefer the cultural elaboration of *Orlando* to the elaboration of colloquial vulgarity of such a contemporary novel as Irwin Shaw's *The Young Lions.*

The second part of *Enemies Of Promise* is a series of short chapters devoted to the dangers, or the possible wrong choices, which beset the Clever Young Man when he leaves the insular society of Eton: journalism, a wife and children, sexual inversion, reviewing, alcoholism, politics, daydreaming, etc. The predicament of the Clever Young Man as Writer is, unfortunately, too familiar to us, but Mr. Connolly's conclusions are admirable. The artist is to be the conscience of the culture, a cud-chewer and not a Commissar.

Elizabeth Pollet

SENSE AND NONSENSE

SENSE AND SENSIBILITY IN MODERN POETRY. By William Van O'Connor. University of Chicago Press. $4.00.

The chief thesis expounded by Mr. O'Connor is a broadened version of Eliot's account of the dissociation of sensibility, the tendency to separate intellect and emotion that began somewhere in the seventeenth century and has continued into the present. Bringing ideas from other sources to bear on the subject, Mr. O'Connor finds that the process in poetry was related to wider historic developments in which science and the categories of science were beginning to monopolize the human mind. As a consequence, he explains: "In an examination of modern poetry we find certain preconceptions which seem to be the result of attempts to evaluate all experience in terms of attitudes and beliefs popularly held to be scientific."

Exactly who or what is covered by "modern poetry" is a little dubious, particularly since the twentieth-century poets to whom one would think it applies are those responsible for rooting out the "preconceptions." But it is also uncertain in the above sentence whether the "preconceptions" are in the "examination" or in the "poetry" and furthermore it is not clear how preconceptions can *result* from an attempt

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the kind mentioned. These difficulties might be elucidated but they are not, and as Mr. O'Connor proceeds his targets get increasingly lost in the thickets of his phraseology. This troublesome vagueness is not so much due to stylistic faults as to the fact that Mr. O'Connor is using polemical doctrines developed by the older critics at a time when the cultural situation has changed radically and the kind of "scientism," "liberalism," and beliefs about poetry that called them forth are only held now, if at all, in circles Mr. O'Connor's volume is scarcely designed to penetrate. Mr. O'Connor is aware of the change but not sufficiently to make him define why and for whom he writes. Hence we get historical expositions of other people's beliefs and what are presumably his own ideas inextricably jumbled together so that it is frequently impossible to determine what is being said.

The critical concepts Mr. O'Connor is most dependent on grew out of the effort made by Eliot and his followers to introduce new evaluations based on direct readings of poetry. Once the resistance to these evaluations has been lessened to the extent that it has, they can only be kept from hardening into rigid dogmas by continuing a direct scrutiny of poetry with a particularly sharp lookout for those elements of value which have been neglected. Instead, the judgments of the older critics have been taken over without correction and given such broad applications that they not only obscure the actual poetry but flagrantly contradict the facts as well as each other. The approved poets are mechanically coupled with the honorific epithets; and all Mr. O'Connor's elaborate caution scarcely rectifies the faultiness of the approach.

The reputations of Eliot and Stevens, for example, are by now sufficiently secure to permit a discriminating examination of their poetry; and it is not particularly helpful to have all the virtues which Eliot found in the poets he admired attributed to his own poetry. When Mr. O'Connor writes (among a few score similar encomiums): "In Stevens as in Eliot, the intellectuality of the Metaphysicals is conjoined with the Symbolist sense of implication," it is probably time to halt the piling up of laurels before they bury the poet. Metaphysical poetry, whether at its best as in Donne or at its worst as in Cleveland, has, as indispensable conditions, a kind of speculative originality and a passion for demonstration which are conspicuously absent from Eliot's poetry, the intellectual material of which is largely composed of preformulated theological and philosophical concepts. In the poetry of Wallace Stevens, intellect is too intimately associated with imagination for it to have much in common with the poetry of Eliot or metaphysical poetry, except perhaps in what it avoids.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

On the subject of Symbolist verse, Mr. O'Connor explains some technical developments well but labors under some basic misapprehensions as to its meaning. To Baudelaire, Laforgue, and Apollinaire he ascribes attitudes toward metropolitan life that would be more appropriate to the master of a boyscout troop. Indeed, the whole moral scheme of French verse seems utterly beyond his compass, though it might be pleaded in his extenuation that metropolitan lyric poetry of the kind written by Baudelaire and his successors or Villon, for that matter, simply does not exist in English and its misinterpretation is endemic in English criticism.

There are some fair passages of exposition in Mr. O'Connor's volume which might have been improved if he had struck out more on his own rather than quoting endlessly from all the greater and lesser lights of contemporary criticism. As to his attempt to extend Eliot's thesis, he does so just sufficiently to make one wonder how he failed to notice the paradox involved in attributing the ills of modern life and poetry to the dissociation of sensibility while defending Christianity. Surely once the matter is considered from any broader standpoint than that of literary history, it should be obvious that the dissociation of sensibility as a human and literary phenomenon is not only causally connected with Christianity but of its very essence. Once you begin characterizing any element of human nature (the lusts and passions, for example) as immitigably evil and divorced from "higher" reality, then the process of dissociation is in full swing and it is merely a question of what direction it shall take. The more consistent Christian philosophers have therefore argued that dissociation is ultimate in human nature and espoused Christianity on precisely the ground that it realizes and adjusts one to the inescapably dissociated and divided condition of man.

The neo-Christian attack on "scientism," which Mr. O'Connor perpetuates, is nothing but a confused sniping at beliefs which have disappeared from all but the most backward areas of science and philosophy. It no longer has even a literary *raison d'être* and continues, I suppose, chiefly out of sheer inability to flush new game.

William Poster

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE WORLD OF JEAN GENET

It was perhaps inevitable that the one post-war writer in France who has actually created the bottomless moral world so successfully skirted and exploited by Sartre should be scarcely known outside the country, and even in Paris should be a good deal more talked about than read. There, Jean Genet is a name and something of a legend in certain circles, but the circles do not extend to the larger or bourgeois French reading public, and even among his admirers it is doubtful if any but the closest have read more than one or two of his books. What following he has had in this country has been even more special and limited than the French editions of his books. There has been an air around his name here as of some perverse perfume, too strong for general consumption.

There are some small, practical reasons for this, which are of the nature of the case. The winds of literary controversy in France have often shown themselves as unkind as apathy to the best creative talents of a period. But aside from that, the world in question is not too respectable even in its intellectual, Sartrian form, and as conveyed by an artist of the power of Genet presents a drastic problem in publishing. There has had to be a sneak approach to it, so that it is hard to find out in what order the books were written and even how many there have been; so far as I know there have been five, including a play, *Les Bonnes,* which was unsuccessfully produced in Paris. The others were all originally printed in private, undated editions, which if available at all are apt to cost in the neighborhood of fifty dollars; of the two that carry the Arbalète imprint, at least one, the early *Miracle de la Rose,* is of such inexcusable weight and size as to be almost unreadable as well as unlendable. The problem of translation is equally drastic, Genet's language being a skillful and original compound of toughness, obscenity and unabashed lyricism. An English translation of *Notre-Dame des Fleurs,* one of the two of this author's books that can be described as novels, is said to be in preparation now in Paris; but so far the best that has been done is a collection of good and beautifully translated excerpts from an incoherent book, *Pompes Funèbres,* which appeared in *View** And Genet can be appreciated no better than Proust in excerpts; his skill works on too long a beat, and his world calls for a longer absorption.

He has therefore been a rarity item and a myth, and because of the perversity and violence of his

* Two sketches by Genet also appeared in the French issue of PARTISAN REVIEW, Spring, 1946.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

subjects—or subject: his work is all variations on one theme—there have clustered around his name all the distortions of a *succès de scandale,* which has plenty to feed on as his writing is never far from autobiography and the massive *Miracle de la Rose,* a long prose poem on prison life, was nothing else. He is spoken of as a homosexual and a criminal who writes about criminals, and he is said to have been "discovered" by Cocteau; he is always a good subject for anecdotes, which are apt to be valued according to a person's interest in continuing to *épater le bourgeois.* That tradition he certainly does exemplify, often to an exasperating and thoroughly foolish degree, and this has helped to obscure the fact that both his gifts and his roots go farther. The general impression of him, such as it is, seems to leave out the heart of the matter, which is that however repellent his preoccupations, and however childish the philosophical equipment that he shares with many of his betters in that line, he is with little question one of the most gifted French prose writers of this generation, and the only one to have created a world nearly comparable in compulsion if not in scope to that of Proust or Céline. He is successor to both of them, and their only one, though he has a closer ancestry among the the poets of the nineteenth century.

Unfortunately, public prudery being what it is, it will probably

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

be a long time before his reputation will be based on much more than hearsay in this country. It is hard to see how the books could be made generally available here except in mutilated form, or even how they could be mutilated, since Genet's sexual candor, to put it mildly, is not eruptive as in Sartre but entirely of the grain; to doctor his writing for commercial purposes would be to operate on every line. And until he can be read it seems labor lost to attempt any large critical estimate of his work. But a few descriptive remarks on his world and technique are in order, by way of tribute, and because it is a strange thing that current discussions of the fate or demise or whatever it is of the novel should take place with no reference to the one writer of the time who has most extended the form—and extended it not at all to bursting, or down another dead end except as any achievement is that, but only by a natural infusion of genius, or life. These mysteries are never imaginable.

There is, however, a different kind of dead end involved. That is the moral one explored most brightly several years ago by Camus, because many factors in French life at the time proposed it, but of which Camus is not a natural inhabitant. Genet is, and that for the purposes of his art is his lucky accident; he happened to be the living embodiment of what everybody else was talking about. The crimes of Camus' Caligula, or even Suetonius' Caligula, are nothing to the ones that are scattered in the most strainless and subordinate way through his pages like so many teacups in a novel by Jane Austen; and the concomitant values investigated and worried this way and that by the existentialists, centering on intensity of experience and despair, were only those that Genet had come by long ago as a child in a boy's reformatory. As a writer, for his period, he had very early a silver spoon in his mouth, and that was prison.

Although *Le Miracle de la Rose,* which I should judge was the first of his published books, is the only one that is actually set in prison

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and describes prison life at any length, really prison, both as poetic symbol and as the origin and standard of values, is his whole world, and all the material that he develops more skillfully later is present in the autobiographical *Miracle*, which twists back and forth between an adult prison and an extraordinary lyrical evocation of childhood in a reformatory called Mettray. The main theme, always the same, stems from the constant, conscious opposition of this world to "yours," the world of habitual morality, which is to be rejected on the quaint grounds of excitement and the "attraction of the forbidden" but also in the higher interest of "moral solitude," freedom and purity. The road to this purity, in which no thought of woman or women ever enters, is paved with every kind of crime, treachery and degeneration, and with a phenomenal amount of physiological detail both sexual and scatological, Genet being above all a sensualist; and the symbol of it is an assassin. In the *Miracle* he is a man named Harcamone, whose shadowy presence in the death cell radiates throughout the prison a mystical intensity that is taken as the standard of all beauty and achievement, and to whom the author attaches the symbol of the rose. "His life lasted from his death sentence to his death." "I speak the very language used by the mystics of all religions to speak of their gods and their mysteries."

That may be, but the Catholic religion certainly predominates, as in the similar diabolism of Rimbaud and Baudelaire, from whom, as well as from Lautréamont, Genet also derives much of the richness and romanticism of his language. "I have carried in my breast extraordinary disorders of pirates drunk with alcohol. . . . " He falls into such poetic rhetoric, and into the first person singular, when it suits him. But he is also, far more than one could suspect from the sometimes monotonous *Miracle*, a novelist with an extraordinarily keen eye for both tangibles and intangibles, and with a very wide variety of techniques at his disposal. There are few contemporary

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

writers anywhere who can deal so surely with a room, a mood or a gesture, even to holding one's attention for pages on a single moment, and in his two best books, *Notre-Dame des Fleurs* and the more recent *Querelle de Brest,* these gifts operate within a large and sturdy structure, giving this world of crime, smut and paederasty a compulsion more to the point than any of the author's own interpretations.

The assassin-saint, with his beautiful physique and "azure" glance, is still there, as the boy murderer Notre-Dame, whose smile in the courtroom gives even the guards "an intuition of the existence of God and the great principles of geometry," and as the more experienced murderer, the sailor Querelle, whose criminal actions and intrigues during a shore-leave in Brest give all his acquaintances a short period of what is meant to be considered the highest happiness. But what imposes itself in both these books is not this willed meaning, but a surrounding and an atmosphere, the whole living environment of the dregs of the world, conveyed—particularly in *Notre-Dame*—with fearful precision, and with a delicate, almost motherly tenderness that grows from corrosion and blooms in the presence of treachery and death. In *Notre-Dame* the title character is not even central, or particularly important. The main figure, who is also a "saint," is a homosexual prostitute named Divine, described in all the minutiae of his decay and the squalor of his Pigalle garret, whose death from tuberculosis is typical of the weird grandeur and lyrical beauty that at his best Genet does create out of his despair. But the despair is the *sine qua non;* it is as if this had been written to illustrate *The Myth of Sisyphus,* and the whole effect would be dissipated by a moment's concession, in hope, fidelity or anything, to "our" world. "Mignon's feelings in front of the coffin? None. He didn't remember Divine any more." Mignon had been Divine's great love.

It takes, of course only the slightest push in the wrong direc-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tion for all this to come to grief, that is to utter and dangerous absurdity, and when this occurs, as it does, in *Pompes Funèbres,* even Genet's fabulous technical equipment can save no more than a few scenes. The technique, developed in the *Miracle* and brought to much greater complexity and power in *Notre-Dame,* is a writhing, twisting, cumulative process, entirely conscious and artful, permitting many sudden breaks and a fusion of points of view that in less gifted hands would lead to chaos, and that does add to the wreckage resulting from Genet's one collision with the values he has spent his life denying. The scene is the liberation of Paris, 1945, and the starting-point is the glorification of his lover, a young Communist killed in the street-fighting; the rest can be imagined. It is an ugly pot-pourri of fascist sentiments, childish contradictions, sexual violence and confused personalities, including Hitler who in one ludicrous scene is shown making love with a young French militiaman. Having dedicated himself to "the marginal world" Genet is obliged to love evil also in the form of the *milice,* if only because they are "hated, vomited." "I had for three years the delicate joy of seeing France terrorized by boys of from sixteen to twenty. . . . I often caressed the handsomest of them, and secretly I recognized them as my envoys, delegated to carry out among the bourgeois the crimes that prudence forbade me to commit myself." In the *Miracle* too he had written, "I love the war, which devoured my most beautiful friends," but he had also indicated in a phrase the basis of his strength: ". . . the war, mysterious for us . . . " Outside prison he is lost; crime loses its purity, and faced with having to make Hitler too an Angel of the Apocalypse he can only run off and hide in more, and still more, sex. This is political *da-da,* and all that can be said for it is that the French bourgeoisie in its fantastic, joyless rigidity has continued to ask for it; to inspire such childishness is one of its old ways of destroying its enemy, art. Céline was one of its victims.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

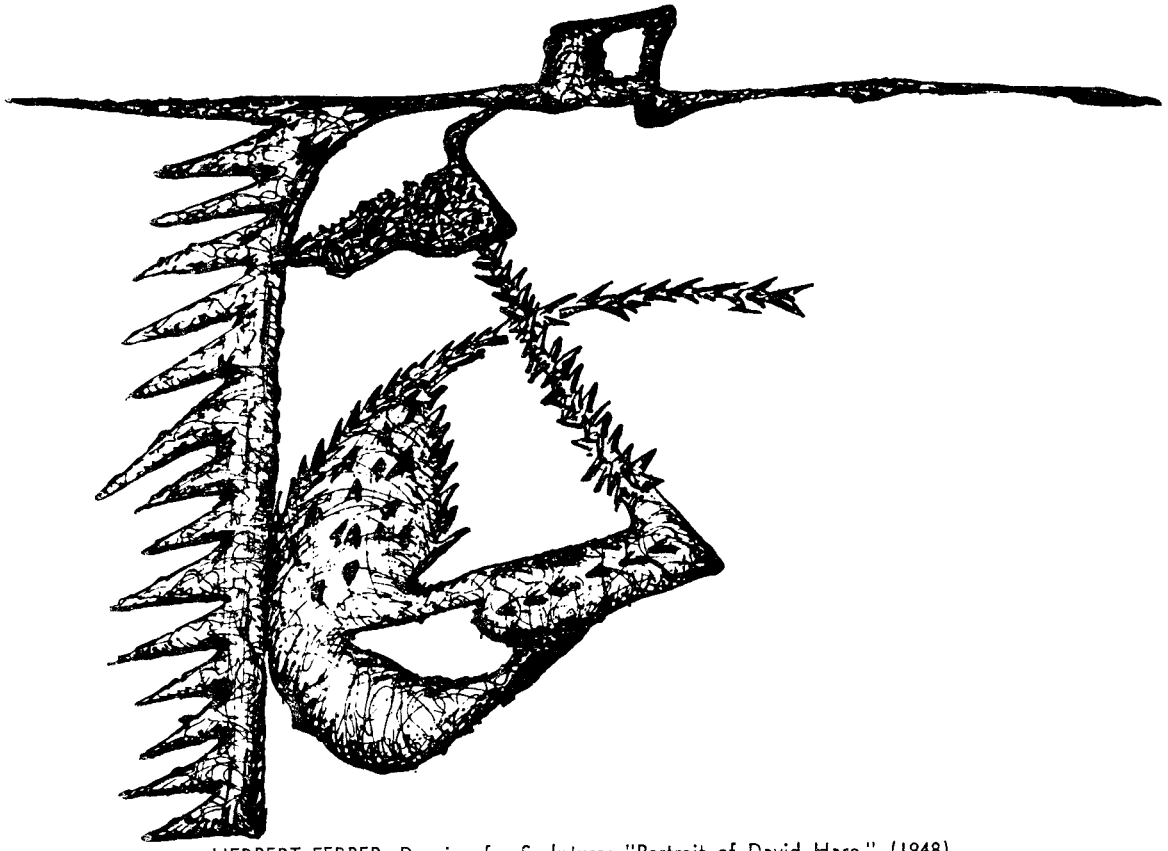
Genet is not yet destroyed. But there is a strong flavor of insanity in these ravings, which while reflecting in its way the disorders of modern life, calls more vividly to mind the whole tradition of France's irresponsible child-poets, for whom after a brilliant burst of fire there was nothing but the asylum or the grave—and in these days the grave can be Nazism in any of its forms. Genet's simple romantic vision of life, his ardent cult of beauty based on murder, is not one that permits much development in an adult world. His assassins die young, and Divine, of whom he writes with such fondness, was an evil-smelling relic at the age of thirty.

For Genet himself the only salvation may be to get arrested again, perhaps for good. But in the meantime he has had the sense to return, in *Querelle de Brest,* to the one narrow vein that is marked out for his particular talent as certain flowers and sentiments were for the early writers of sonnets. His achievement within it has been genuine and impressive, and should be known here, however certain it is to be misused and misinterpreted. In the other reformatories, Genet writes in the *Miracle de la Rose,* the boys had always had a habit of making up songs, but in Mettray there were not many songs because that one reformatory was surrounded by hedges instead of walls, and so sorrow was not repressed enough to express itself that way. America at the moment is Mettray, with the difference that we can presumably express ourselves too; but there is not much common vocabulary just now between us and the other reformatories.

Eleanor Clark

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



HERBERT FERBER. Drawing for Sculpture: "Portrait of David Hare." (1948)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED